

**“It seems like no one cares”: Youth Perspectives on Housing Abandonment and Urban  
Blight**

by

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University of Pittsburgh, 2014

A large body of research suggests that environmental health hazards, specifically, abandoned properties, are a growing problem that disproportionately affects low-income communities of color. Youth in affected neighborhoods are at particularly high risk for exposure to outdoor hazards due to their increased likelihood to use active means of travel in their daily activities. Living in a community characterized by housing abandonment has been associated with myriad negative physical and mental health outcomes among youth. Though there is a large body of work demonstrating that various features of neighborhoods have salient effects on outcomes for youth, fewer studies have documented *how* youth experience abandoned properties in neighborhoods.

The purpose of this study was to address this gap by learning what meaning youth ascribe to abandoned properties in a community with high levels of vacancy. I used a mixed methods community based participatory research approach that included participatory photo mapping, a method that combines photography, youth-led neighborhood tours, and advocacy; in depth interviews with youth; and spatial analysis. The study aimed to extend existing theory, specifically broken windows theory, from the perspective of youth in a neighborhood with high levels of housing vacancy.

Youth described their own version of broken windows theory, a process through which abandoned properties exert their impact on young people and their community. This multi-step

process includes: 1) unrepaired signs of incivility signal that no one cares; 2) residents withdraw, become more fearful; 3) untended property becomes “fair game” leading to more crime and incivilities; and finally, 4) a breakdown of community control and individual and community vulnerability.

This study suggests that abandoned properties are a visual cue that no one cares about the neighborhood. Youth reported that vacant properties facilitate delinquency and play a role in a complex web of community decline. They also conveyed that the solution may rest in the hands of youth and described making meaningful changes through small efforts like community beautification. These findings provide the impetus for a number of social work practice, research, and policy implications and suggest the need for future youth-engaged intervention research.

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## **DEDICATION**

To Alena, Keelin, and Aiden

Joe, Pete, and Derek

Kasey and Login

Kaley and Mya

Tree Taishawn and Rich Soil 'Riah

To each generation of young people who have inspired my path and all those to come.

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## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

*“If I just meet somebody and they was like, oh, so where you live, or where you from? I was like, I live in Homewood. They’ll like, they’ll just give me this crazy look, be like, oh are you ok? You still live there? Yes, I live there.”-Breona*

I met Kadijah<sup>1</sup> in the summer between her 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade school year. A 14 year old whose grandmother had scraped together the money to send her to Catholic school after she was thrown out of the mainstream school for fighting, she was preparing to attend Westinghouse High School in the fall because her family could no longer afford tuition. She was oppositional at first. She wore her Coach shoes and matching purse to the job site despite the dress code that called for work boots. She pushed back against authority and half-heartedly completed her work; she was not about to ruin her nails in the dirt. One day, when her grandmother could not pick her up, I gave her a ride home. This started a several days a week tradition of commuting together.

During our rides, I met another Kadijah. She and I laughed and sang along to the radio

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<sup>1</sup> I use pseudonyms in place of the participants’ real names. I do not use a pseudonym for the neighborhood or organizations I worked with. Using the actual place name has the power to increase my accountability as a scholar because future researchers may replicate aspects of this work and visit the community if they wish (Duneier, 1999).

together, talked about her experiences in juvenile detention and her transformation in Catholic school, and formed a bond. One day, she confided that her mother had not been home in days and that she and her sister had run out of food. We stopped at the corner store and she chose some snacks to get them by for the night. She promised it was only temporary. “You think this is the first time? I’m okay, Sam,” she said. I dropped her at her row house, which was attached to a vacant unit. It was the third home I had dropped her off at since our first ride together.

Her adjustment to Westinghouse was slow. She narrowly avoided going back to placement after she left a gash requiring stitches in another young woman’s face during a fight. “I can’t go back to placement, I need to change my ways!” she said with her typical high drama. Her grandmother began picking her up from school religiously. This meant driving across the city from the Hill District to Homewood to pick Kadijah up at Westinghouse to drive her the five blocks from the school to the Operation Better Block office because, according to Kadijah, “she don’t want me walkin’ in Homewood.” At this point, she was straddling three homes, from her grandmother’s in the Hill District, to her mother’s boyfriend’s place (in Highland Park at the time but previously in Homewood and Larimer), to her own boyfriend’s in Homewood. Sometimes we would arrive at her mother’s, only to find the door locked. Kadijah would bounce from place to place until she heard her mother was back. Kadijah joined the Lady Bulldogs basketball team and blossomed through the guidance of her coach and the positive influence of her teammates.

Nearly three years later, I sat down for my final interview with Kadijah. She had just returned from her summer advanced placement course at Carnegie Mellon University and was lounging in pajamas in her mother’s living room. We chatted about her class and her recent application to work at Dunkin Donuts before we began a semi-structured interview about

abandoned properties. During the interview, Kadijah leaned back and described her own experiences with abandoned properties and relayed how abandoned properties are used by youth in Homewood. Her on-again off-again boyfriend was a known drug dealer who used abandoned homes as “trap houses” to store drugs, guns, and money. She knew he and the other boys had guns; boys as young as 14 have easy access to guns in the neighborhood. They freak her out, she says, but he always has money and does not bring the guns around her. She described how frequently Westinghouse is put on lock down due to shootings and how the school is surrounded on all sides by trap houses claimed by rival groups of young men. She describes the school as “ghetto” but she feels she is getting a good education there, despite the difficulties in the neighborhood. She hopes to go to school on a basketball scholarship and maybe become an engineer.

The youth research assistants who co-constructed the data and analysis for this dissertation share stories similar to Kadijah’s. Like many youth in neighborhoods that lack supportive, youth promoting environments, Kadijah walks a tightrope between a bright future and a future of hardship. Her talents in academics and basketball will allow her to leave Homewood and pursue opportunities, but not if she takes a wrong step in the face of many risk factors. She is exposed to risks at multiple systems levels, from her mother’s drug habits that leave the family without food, to her transient, substandard housing. The abandoned houses that pock her neighborhood only enhance existing neighborhood risk factors. She described feelings of fear, anxiety, and at times apathy in the face of a neighborhood built environment that is a constant visual reminder of all of her own challenges.

In this dissertation, I aimed to understand how high school aged youth experience and interpret cues in the neighborhood built environment, specifically vacant and abandoned houses.

I used a mixed methods approach that included participatory photo mapping, a method that combines photography, youth-led neighborhood tours, and advocacy; in depth interviews with Homewood youth; and spatial analysis. This mixed methods approach allowed me to triangulate and analyze multiple sources of data to provide a rich interpretation of the vacant property phenomenon, as it is experienced by Homewood youth. The study aimed to extend and refine existing theory, specifically broken windows theory, from the perspective of young people in a neighborhood with high levels of housing vacancy.

## **1.1 SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM**

Nationally, between 2000 and 2010, there was a 51% increase in the number of non-seasonal vacant properties from 7 million to over 10 million (GAO, 2011). The economic downturn and foreclosure crisis exacerbated the decline of already disinvested urban neighborhoods when the problem (and the resources to address the problem) spread into outer ring suburbs (Hollander, 2011). The areas most affected by housing vacancy can be broken into two categories: those in former industrial, rustbelt cities such as Detroit and Pittsburgh and those in recent rapidly expanding sunbelt cities like Phoenix and Las Vegas that have seen increased foreclosure and vacancy in the wake of the housing crisis (Hollander, 2011; Schilling, 2009). This dissertation will focus on issues relevant to the former; urban areas that went into a state of rapid decline and severe population loss with the decline of industrial and manufacturing jobs throughout the 1970s. Many former rust belt cities contend with vacancy rates considerably higher than the national rate of 8-10% including Detroit at 23%, Cleveland at 19%, and

Baltimore at 15% (GAO, 2011). The sheer number of vacant units, well over 100,000 in Pittsburgh, presents a daunting challenge to policy makers and municipal governments (Census, 2010). One of the primary challenges is the cost associated with remediating and razing vacant properties; in 2009 the city of Pittsburgh spent over \$5 million to demolish 547 abandoned homes at an average cost of over \$9,140 per building (Lamb, 2010).

Housing vacancy in Pittsburgh is highly concentrated in a few disadvantaged neighborhoods. In Homewood, the neighborhood where this study took place, 57% of the parcels, which include land and structures, in the neighborhood are vacant and 82% of the vacant homes have been abandoned for more than 36 months (Census, 2010; U.C.S.U.R., 2011; Zuberi, Gradeck, Hopkinson, & Duck, 2013). The percentage of buildings with code violations in Pittsburgh was approximately 6.7% in 2010 while the percentage of buildings in Homewood with code violations was 22.3% (PGHSNAP, 2010). Further, while 1% of buildings in Pittsburgh were condemned during that time period, approximately 5% of Homewood's buildings were condemned. In addition to their deleterious effects on neighborhoods, vacant and abandoned properties have a distinct impact on resident well-being and in particular, the well being of young people.

Numerous reviews demonstrate that neighborhood of residence matters for youth and exerts its impact through many different pathways (Evans, 2006; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson, Morenoff, & Gannon-Rowley, 2002). A smaller but growing body of research focuses on the relationship between the neighborhood built environment and health and social outcomes among young people. Broadly defined, the built environment includes any part of the physical environment that is constructed or modified by humans; elements include buildings and the physical infrastructure of roads, sidewalks, and

transportation as well as the arrangement, distribution, and appearance of physical elements in a community (Handy, Boarnet, Ewing, & Killingsworth, 2002; Saelens & Handy, 2008).

Typically, studies that incorporate aspects of the built environment combine environmental aspects into aggregate variables that take into account both structural (i.e., abandoned houses) and social (i.e., open air drug use) neighborhood factors, which makes it difficult to parse out the possible independent effect of features in the built environment (Evans, 2003). However, the research has begun to establish a link between environmental features, specifically vacant properties, and health and social outcomes among youth.

In terms of physical health, the research suggests that vacant properties and disorder in the built environment are associated with higher rates of obesity, asthma, lead poisoning, injuries, abuse, and child maltreatment (Brisbon, Plumb, Brawer, & Paxman, 2005; Cummins & Jackson, 2001; Dunton, Kaplan, Wolch, Jerrett, & Reynolds, 2009; McDonell & Skosireva, 2009). Fewer studies have incorporated measures of the built environment and its effects on the psychosocial well-being of young people (Clark, Myron, Stansfeld, & Candy, 2007). The studies that do exist have connected neighborhood disorder and property vacancy with delinquency, drug use and sales, early sexual initiation, sexually transmitted disease, youth violence, depression, anxiety, fear, and weaker social networks (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Caughy, O'Campo, & Patterson, 2001; Dulin-Keita, Casazza, Fernandez, Goran, & Gower, 2012; Ingoldsby et al., 2006; Jang & Johnson, 2001; Lang et al., 2010; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Molnar, Miller, Azrael, & Buka, 2004; Plybon & Kliwer, 2001; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2009; Singh & Ghandour, 2012; Yonas et al., 2009; Yonas, O'Campo, Burke, & Gielen, 2007). Though a large body of work demonstrates that various features of neighborhoods have salient effects on outcomes for youth, little research specifically documents *how* youth experience and

ascribe meaning to the built environment more generally, and vacant properties specifically. Most often, researchers use objective observations, parent-reports, or census-driven measures to understand the impact of blight on young people even though we know that youth opinions often differ in important ways from these objective and parent-reported observations (Ewart & Suchday, 2002; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2009).

A number of studies identify vacant property as a key variable in how young people perceive and are affected by neighborhoods, yet only two studies focus specifically on the effects of vacant property and built environmental variables from a resident perspective (Ewart & Suchday, 2002; Garvin, Branas, Keddem, Sellman, & Cannuscio, 2012; Redwood et al., 2010; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2009). Neither of these studies incorporated the perceptions of youth. There is a need to specify what specific physical neighborhood attributes affect youth and how they operate (Coulton, Korbin, & Su, 1996; Evans, 2003).

It is important to consider youth in this body of work because adolescents are disproportionately exposed to vacant housing related hazards compared to other neighborhood residents. (D. T. Duncan et al., 2012). Parents of children in high risk urban areas report that they shield their children from the outdoors out of fear for their safety (Clements, 2004; Franzini et al., 2009; Singh & Ghandour, 2012). Adolescents are unique because they experience more freedom and enhanced mobility within their neighborhoods as compared to young children; yet they have relatively restricted mobility compared to adults who may leave the neighborhood for work and have access to a vehicle. Finally, though there is considerable research that focuses on the problems of youth, it is still somewhat unusual to include youth in the research process (Jacquez, Vaughn, & Wagner, 2013; Langhout & Thomas, 2010).



In sum, the research suggests that there is a connection between property vacancy and physical and psychosocial outcomes for young people. Despite this knowledge, few studies focus on the ways these community features affect young people from the point of view of young people themselves.

Although there is a small but growing body of knowledge on the relationship between blight and vacant property and its impact on young people, there are a number of important gaps in the extant literature. These gaps include the following: 1) the majority of the research has been conducted on adults; despite the fact that adolescents are, on average, more likely than adults to be exposed to hazards in the built environment; 2) the existing research lacks a youth perspective on the issues of vacant property and its meaning; 3) research on young people has focused disproportionately on health outcomes of interest to researchers with little understanding of what youth perceive as the most salient outcomes; 4) the small body of work exists in other disciplines (e.g., geography, urban planning, public health) and does not include a social work perspective. Several recent manuscripts have called for more interpretive work to better understand resident perceptions of property vacancy and its impact on themselves and their communities (Dennis, Gaulocher, Carpiano, & Brown, 2009; Redwood et al., 2010; Silverman, Yin, & Patterson, 2013).

For example, in their study of how the built environment affects health outcomes, Redwood (2010) noted, “none of the above studies have explicitly examined residents’ perceptions of, or active efforts to intervene in, neighborhood or housing conditions; challenges and barriers they confront in their efforts to do so; and the implications for the social as well as built environment contexts in which they live” (p. 55). Other scholars have called for more research on housing vacancy and abandonment in general and resident perceptions of the effects,

in particular. A recent call reiterated the gap illustrated by Redwood, et al. (2010), noting that, “there is a dearth of perception-based analysis and qualitative research on abandonment. Studies focusing on the perceptions of residents and policy-makers would enhance our understanding of the effects abandonment has on communities” (Silverman et al., 2013, p. 148). Understanding youths’ perceptions of the built environment of neighborhoods is an important step that will help establish how vacant properties affect resident and community well being and may be used as a conduit for empowerment to influence neighborhood planning and community development (Dennis, 2006; Silverman et al., 2013).

Bearing in mind these gaps and the professional imperatives of social work that necessitate the inclusion and meaningful participation of vulnerable populations, this study sought to explore the meaning and perceived effects of property vacancy through the lens of adolescents.

## **1.2 OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY**

I used a community based participatory research approach to gain an understanding of the ways in which youth who live in a neighborhood characterized by high levels of property vacancy experience, interpret, and ascribe meaning to vacant properties. I aimed to spatially contextualize these experiences in order to combine lay knowledge and administrative data to triangulate and richly describe the growing problem of property vacancy and its meaning and implications. In order to achieve this, I used mixed methods spatial analysis including

participatory photo mapping, GIS analysis at the land parcel level, and in depth interviews.

Several research questions guided this study. They were as follows:

- 1) What meaning do young people ascribe to vacant properties in a community with high levels of vacancy?
- 2) What do young people perceive as the effects of vacant properties on their own well-being and that of their community?
- 3) How do young people experience, characterize, and internalize vacant property related cues in their neighborhoods?

This dissertation is organized into five chapters. Chapter one, the current chapter, describes the scope of the vacant property problem and the gaps in research on how neighborhood features affect young people. It also introduces the research questions and presents a framework for the document. The second chapter is the literature review. It covers the background and history of neighborhood effects research and analyzes the current state of knowledge regarding how the built environment affects young people. Chapter two also describes youth participation in research and interventions in order to frame the practical implications of the study. The chapter is grounded in ecological theory and theories of disorder including social disorganization theory and broken windows theory. Chapter three outlines the methods I used in the study. Specifically, I describe the results of a mixed methods case study consisting of 1) GIS (Geographic Information Systems) analysis of housing vacancy in Pittsburgh and its correlates; 2) Participatory Photo Mapping with youth research assistants; and 3) In depth interviews. The analysis of the three distinct, yet interrelated sources of data about vacant property allowed me to integrate and triangulate findings about the meaning and implications of the growing problem of

vacant property in the day to day lives of young people in Homewood. This chapter also describes the analysis process, known as grounded visualization.

I present the results in Chapter four. I begin with a description of the prevalence and condition of housing vacancy in Homewood and go on to share the perspectives expressed by the youth participants about how they interpret vacant houses as symbols of the fact that no one cares about Homewood. The chapter then describes how youth respond to these symbols with withdrawal, fear, and feeling a loss of control. It describes how vacant houses are visual symbols of opportunities for delinquency and, additionally, facilitate delinquency through their use as “trap houses.” Taken together, these factors contribute to an overall loss of community control, stigma, and vulnerability that I discuss to conclude the chapter. Chapter five provides a final discussion, limitations, and implications of the findings for social work policy, practice, and future research. I place the discussion in the context of what is known about property vacancy and describe the contribution of this study to address the gaps outlined in chapters one and two.

### **1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

The empirical research on the effect of vacant properties on community residents has not thoroughly addressed its impact on young people. There is a dearth of research that examines the experience of living in neighborhoods characterized by high levels of property vacancy from the perspective of individuals who experience it. This study contributed to this understudied area of neighborhood effects research by using a mixed methods approach to examine how residents, particularly young people, perceive and ascribe meaning to property vacancy. This research is

significant because it may have implications for knowledge building, housing and community development policy, and interventions at the individual and neighborhood level.

The present study uses qualitative methods to learn from those most affected by vacant property by gaining a rich understanding of their lived experience. Young people are at high risk for exposure to vacant property related hazards so perception based research on the meaning and perceived effects of property vacancy should include young people. This study captured youth perspectives and these perspectives may help to inform and refine how future research models measure and account for vacant properties. There is a lack of agreement on exactly what vacant properties represent to community members and this dissertation presents a youth perspective that helps to capture how those who are disproportionately affected by property vacancy define its meaning. This foundation can be used to build community and policy interventions.

Incorporating the perspectives of young people is an important foundation for interventions aimed at improving health and well-being. Youth in urban neighborhoods have long been problematized and stigmatized. Though a growing group of researchers has recognized the ability of youth to serve as active partners in research for neighborhood change, in both a neighborhood context and a research context, “many adults think of young people as problems, and young people accept adult images of their deficiencies rather than viewing themselves as agents of change” (Checkoway & Gutierrez, 2006). To date, though there is a plethora of research that focuses on problems specific to urban youth and their neighborhoods, they are infrequently looked to for answers, solutions, or even their perspectives on the issues (Dennis, 2006; Dennis et al., 2009). Because youth are disproportionately exposed and understudied, research that values the perspectives of youth and utilizes a participatory approach may be a conduit for empowerment of young people.

## **1.4 RELEVANCE TO SOCIAL WORK**

In this section I will describe why property vacancy and its relationship to the lives of young people living in declining urban communities is an important social welfare issue. Further, I will describe how the approach used for this study aligns with social work values. Blight and vacant properties affect young people's physical, social, and mental health as well as the health and well-being of the communities and cities in which they live, so it is an important issue for social work researchers and practitioners.

Most importantly, environmental hazards including vacant properties are not experienced equally by all people. It is clear that blighted, vacant properties are disproportionately located in impoverished communities of color. Though the problems associated with blight may affect people of any age, race or socioeconomic background, empirical evidence shows that African American and Hispanic young people are far more likely than their white counterparts to live near vacant and other substandard housing, even after controlling for differences in demographics and socioeconomic status (Rosenbaum & Harris, 2001). Additionally, African Americans are more likely than people of other races to live in neighborhoods characterized by concentrated poverty, isolation, racial segregation, and decreased access to resources (Massey & Denton, 1993; Zenk et al., 2007). Isolated minority communities with high concentrations of poverty may receive fewer and lower quality municipal services (e.g., garbage collection, code enforcement), so property vacancy and blight goes unchecked and spreads contagiously (Geronimus, 2000; Massey & Denton, 1993). Thus, despite the fact that property vacancy can affect everyone who lives in and around deteriorating neighborhoods, it is clear that vacancy and

the associated policies designed to deal with blight have had the largest impact on the poor and minority groups in disadvantaged urban areas.

In addition to its relevance to vulnerable and oppressed populations, the study of how neighborhood factors like vacant properties affect young people fits within the person-in-environment framework that is central to social work practice and research. An understanding of the macro-environmental factors that influence youth in the neighborhood context can help move past the deficit model of understanding urban youth as inherently pathological, and work to understand the interrelatedness of individual and community processes and outcomes. The professional imperatives of social work suggest that in order to challenge traditional models of research *on* vulnerable populations we must use a strengths-based perspective that works *with* vulnerable groups to produce knowledge that can be used for positive community and youth development.

The values of the CBPR approach align closely with this strengths-based perspective and will add to the relevance of this work for the social work profession (B. A. Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 1998; B.A. Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Becker, 2001). CBPR has proven to be a highly effective and rigorous research approach that is particularly relevant for use with marginalized populations (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). Among the most relevant aspects of the CBPR approach to social work are its commitment to draw upon strengths within a community, facilitate empowering processes that attend to social inequality, and to achieve a balance between research and action that benefits both the researchers and the communities in which they work (Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). This empowerment and capacity building focus clearly advances the core values of the social work profession, including the mandate to advocate for dignity for all people, especially those most vulnerable and oppressed (NASW, 2008). Further, this work

fits within a rich tradition of ecological and neighborhood based research in social work (Dubois, 1899; Hillier, 2007; Hull-House, 1895; Riis, 1890). Following the social survey tradition and using a social justice lens, this research may help to better understand the spatial and physical aspects of neighborhoods and how they influence outcomes for young people.

## **1.5 SUMMARY**

Urban blight has been an issue of concern to social workers since the emergence of the profession (Hull-House, 1895; Riis, 1890). It is only recently, however, that we are beginning to understand that its impact extends beyond aesthetics; it affects people physically and mentally. Though considerable recent work explores the impact of blight and disorder in the built environment, there are only two studies that directly ask residents to report on their perceptions and the meanings they ascribe to vacant properties. To my knowledge, there are no studies that specifically examine young people's perceptions of vacant properties, despite the knowledge that they are disproportionately exposed. Accordingly, this is a promising area for exploration.

The core values of social work call for a professional commitment to working with vulnerable populations from a strengths-based perspective. Youth of color are a particularly vulnerable and marginalized population; especially those who live in areas characterized by blight and disorder. The present study examines the problem of property vacancy from a macro perspective using spatial analysis to better understand the contours of life in a high need urban neighborhood and to augment this understanding with a youth perspective on the meaning of property vacancy.



## **2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW**

There are several areas of scholarship that inform the current state of knowledge regarding how vacant properties affect young people: empirical research on neighborhood characteristics that support or impede youth development, theoretical perspectives on ecological and environmental influences on humans, and the process and context of youth participation. Initially, I will review the growing body of empirical research that focuses on the relationship between neighborhood characteristics, specifically property vacancy, and physical and mental health outcomes for young people. Next, I will discuss theoretical perspectives that have framed scholarship in the area of neighborhood effects on youth with a focus on theories of disorder and decline. I review several theories, finishing with a longer discussion of broken windows theory, which frames this dissertation.

I then put forward an argument for including youth voices in research focused on neighborhood effects and will outline barriers to youth participation in research and interventions. I present a brief review historical policies that led to concentrations of vacancy in urban areas and outline current policy interventions aimed at reducing the impact of property abandonment and their limitations. Finally, I will underscore the dearth of qualitative research about young people's perceptions of neighborhoods and property vacancy and provide rationale for incorporating the opinions of young people.

## **2.1 THE EFFECTS OF VACANT PROPERTIES ON YOUTH**

Despite much theoretical development and interest in the area of neighborhood effects on children and youth, considerably fewer studies focus specifically on the impact of vacant and abandoned properties on young people. In fact, a recent review of the effects of the environment on children and youth noted that, “several adverse child outcomes are related to residence in economically impoverished neighborhoods with individual-level SES statistical controls, but the role of physical neighborhood characteristics is unclear” (Evans, 2006, p. 435). The following section will expand on the introduction to review research that focuses specifically on the effects of disorder in the physical environment on young people.

Because housing is nested within neighborhoods, it can be a challenge to disentangle the effect of vacant properties from neighborhood factors such as poverty (Sampson et al., 2002). Countless studies incorporate composite measures of neighborhood distress, neighborhood stability, and the overall impact of residence in impoverished neighborhoods. This review focuses on those studies that explicitly define physical disorder in the built environment (including vacant properties as an individual variable or within an index) as an independent variable; several comprehensive reviews have outlined the effects of neighborhood of residence

on child and youth outcomes in greater detail (Evans, 2006; Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Sampson et al., 2002).

Empirical research has examined two primary types of outcomes as they relate to neighborhood disorder; psychosocial and physical. The psychosocial outcomes studies can be broken into two categories. First, there are studies that analyze the relationship between physical disorder and externalizing behaviors including risk behaviors, delinquency, drug use, and early sexual initiation. A second group of studies focus on the relationship between neighborhood physical disorder and internalizing behaviors including mistrust, feeling unsafe, depression, and anxiety. Another group of studies examines the impact of the built environment on physical health. Though these areas are examined separately in this review, it should be noted that scholars in the area of neighborhood effects research have exposed the difficulty in separating the mechanism and the processes through which disorder operates suggesting that, “further research is needed to determine whether disorder is etiologically analogous to crime, a cause of crime (see broken windows theory), a mechanism that has independent consequences for mental health, or some combination thereof” (Sampson et al., 2002, p. 465). The following sections will expand on each of these categories.

### **2.1.1 Psychosocial and Mental Health: Externalizing and Delinquency**

Some of the earliest studies of juvenile delinquency and problem behaviors focused on the role of the urban environment in fostering delinquency (Shaw & McKay, 1942). Though the original conceptualization focused on the role of social disorder (low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility), further revisions to the landmark work over the years

have expanded to incorporate the role of neighborhood structural characteristics including features of the built environment like vacant properties (Massey & Denton, 1993; Sampson & Groves, 1989). Children and youth who engage in delinquent and high risk behaviors including drug use, criminal behavior, and early sexual initiation place themselves at risk for injury, sexually transmitted disease, pregnancy, early mortality and a variety of other psychologically and physically injurious outcomes (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Popkin, Leventhal, & Weismann, 2010). Further, these behaviors are associated with poorer adult outcomes including incarceration, lower occupational and educational attainment, and alcohol and drug abuse (Sampson & Laub, 1992; Shiner, Masten, & Roberts, 2003). The following section will summarize the 13 major studies that focus on the role of disorder in the physical environment on children's delinquency and risk behaviors.

The studies consistently found that neighborhood environmental factors were a contributor to youth violence; all but one found significant neighborhood effects on juvenile risk and problem behavior. Four of the studies reviewed were descriptive and touched on the meaning that participants ascribed to abandoned and physically deteriorated properties, though the focus of the papers was not vacant property specific (Pitner & Astor, 2008; Yonas et al., 2009; Yonas, O'Campo, Burke, & Gielen, 2010). The other nine presented quantitative findings drawn from large samples across the United States that varied in composition from nationally representative to purposive samples of low income and African American participants (Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2003; Caughy, O'Campo, & Patterson, 2001; Ingoldsby, et al., 2006; Jang & Johnson, 2001; Lang et al., 2010; Molnar, Miller, et al., 2004; Plybon & Kliwer, 2001; Singh & Ghandour, 2012; Whitaker, Furr-Holden, Floyd, Chatterjee, & Latimer, 2010). (Caughy, O'Campo, & Muntaner, 2003; Caughy et al., 2001; Ingoldsby et al., 2006; Jang &

Johnson, 2001; Lang et al., 2010; Molnar, Miller, et al., 2004; Plybon & Kliwer, 2001; Singh & Ghandour, 2012; D. E. Whitaker, Furr- Holden, Floyd, Chatterjee, & Latimer, 2010)

Descriptive studies suggest that vacant housing plays both a psychological and structural role in the promotion of violent and delinquent behaviors among youth. In a series of studies that took place in Baltimore and Pittsburgh, prominent neighborhood individuals and youth were engaged using in-depth interviews and arts based qualitative elicitation techniques to better understand children's safety and neighborhood contributors to youth violence. In each of these studies, vacant housing was regarded as psychologically affecting young people's perception of themselves and their neighborhood. From a structural perspective, these properties were said to serve as a location for drug selling where youth were exposed to, learn about, and are recruited into the culture of drug selling, gambling, violence, and drug use (Yonas et al., 2007{Yonas, 2009 #12; 2010}). Though these studies did not set out specifically to explore the role of vacant properties, they were a prominent theme; suggestive of the importance of exploring the significance of vacant properties in more depth.

Another descriptive study focused on a sample of 377 youth in grades two through eight from two Midwestern cities who were shown pictures of houses; one set of photographs showed high levels of incivilities including deterioration and neglected streets while the other set had been digitally enhanced to depict the same structure and streetscape without signs of physical deterioration (Pitner & Astor, 2008). Participants overwhelmingly associated the photographs of disordered physical environments with likelihood to be in a poor area (98%) and the belief that the property was dangerous or scary (96.5%) (Pitner & Astor, 2008). Moreover, they were asked to respond to a prompt regarding whether physical violence as retribution to name calling was appropriate in the environment depicted in each of the photographs (through a vignette prompt).

Most students (87%) condemned retribution in both environments. Among those who supported physical violence as retribution, more than half approved of retribution only in the disordered physical environment (Pitner & Astor, 2008). These findings are largely supported in the quantitative literature, which I describe in the following section.

Among the quantitative studies reviewed, two used large national datasets (Jang & Johnson, 2001; Singh & Ghandour, 2012); three used large samples representative of large metropolitan areas including Chicago and Baltimore (Caughy et al., 2003; Caughy et al., 2001; Molnar, Miller, et al., 2004); and four used population-specific samples including low income participants, African American participants, or those with specific clinical diagnoses (Ingoldsby et al., 2006; Lang et al., 2010; Plybon & Kliwer, 2001; D. E. Whitaker et al., 2010). In these studies, disorder in the physical environment was associated with higher levels of serious behavioral problems (Ingoldsby et al., 2006; Plybon & Kliwer, 2001; Singh & Ghandour, 2012), concealed firearm carrying (Molnar, Miller, et al., 2004), and use of marijuana and hard drugs (Jang & Johnson, 2001) after controlling for demographic and socioeconomic variables. Further, adults in neighborhoods characterized by disorder reported being more fearful and less willing to intervene in acts of youth delinquency and misbehavior; thus children and youth in these neighborhoods were more likely to engage in delinquent behavior and less likely to be regulated by local adults (Caughy et al., 2001; Sampson & Morenoff, 1997; Taylor, 1996). The resultant environmental context supports youth problem behaviors and discourages adult intervention and has serious implications for safety and psychosocial well-being in neighborhoods characterized by high rates of physical disorder.

The two studies focusing on the neighborhood environment and its impact on high risk sexual behaviors among youth came to different conclusions; among African American

adolescent males in Baltimore, no neighborhood effects were found, but in a clinically based trial in Providence, Chicago, and Atlanta, adolescents from high risk physical environments were more than twice as likely to engage in sex with casual partners and test positive for sexually transmitted infections (Lang et al., 2010). It should be noted that non-youth focused but relevant studies support the association between a disordered physical environment and sexually transmitted infection (D. A. Cohen, Mason, et al., 2003; D. A. Cohen et al., 2000) and lend credence to the notion that disordered environments support high risk sexual and drug related behaviors (e.g., “crack houses” where the drug and sex trades take place) (Inciardi & Surratt, 2001). When young people engage in criminal and delinquent behaviors, early sexual initiation, and externalizing behaviors it can have serious consequences for their immediate and long-term safety.

In summary, all but one of the 13 studies reviewed found that neighborhood physical disorder and vacant properties are significantly associated with delinquency and high risk behaviors among children and youth. These types of behaviors put young people at risk for psychological and physical injury thus magnifying the direct negative impact of the behavior. The empirical research in this area suggests that vacant properties and physical disorder have strong implications for young people’s psychosocial well-being.

### **2.1.2 Psychosocial and Mental Health: Internalizing and Fear**

Research on fear of crime boomed from the 1970s through the 1990s as increased mass media coverage and political rhetoric drove fear of crime to all time highs (Covington & Taylor, 1991; Romer, Jamieson, & Aday, 2003). Among adults, fear of crime is widespread and

concentrated in subgroups of those least likely to be victimized; that is, young males report the lowest levels of fear yet are the most likely to actually be victimized. Studies have consistently found that resident perceived and actual (objectively measured) incivilities are positively related to fear of crime and negatively associated with feelings of safety in adult samples (Perkins & Taylor, 1996; Perkins, Wandersman, Rich, & Taylor, 1993; Rosenbaum & Harris, 2001; Rountree & Land, 1996). However, fewer studies have focused on youth's perceptions of their neighborhoods and how they relate to fear and psychological responses. This is puzzling based on the wealth of research that suggests children and youth in urban neighborhoods experience multiple traumatic environmental exposures (community violence, intimate partner violence, correlates of poverty) with psychological results that have been likened to "combat fatigue" and "urban violence traumatic stress response syndrome" (Ceballo, Dahl, Aretakis, & Ramirez, 2001; Meets & Gordon, 1975; Parson, 1994). Though the effects of community violence exposure on young people are well documented, built environmental features like vacant properties that attract and facilitate violent and disorderly behavior and their impact on fear of crime have been explored less frequently. The following section summarizes the nine studies that examine the relationship between disorder in the urban built environment, fear, and internalizing among children and youth.

These studies consistently found associations between neighborhood physical disorder and child and youth mental health. The studies were primarily cross-sectional and all but one utilized multivariate statistical analyses. Most samples were drawn from large metropolitan areas including Baltimore, Los Angeles, New York City, and Birmingham (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Dulin-Keita et al., 2012; Ewart & Suchday, 2002; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn,



2003; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2009). Three studies used clinical samples from placement facilities or other clinical sites (Buu et al., 2009; Lane, 2009; Perez-Smith, Spirito, & Boergers, 2002).

All but one of the quantitative studies supported the relationship between neighborhood physical disorder and psychological well-being among children and youth. Physical disorder was associated with symptoms of depression and anxiety (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Buu et al., 2009; Ewart & Suchday, 2002; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2009), weaker social networks (Perez-Smith et al., 2002), and lower levels of serum cortisol (Dulin-Keita et al., 2012). Serum cortisol maintains homeostasis during acute stress. Exposure to chronic stressors can result in dysregulation, leading to increased risk of neuronal damage, immune disorders, and mental health disorders (Dulin-Keita et al., 2012). Young people from neighborhoods with high levels of disorder, and African American children and youth in particular, exhibited lower serum cortisol levels than children and youth from neighborhoods with less physical disorder thus putting them at physiological risk for mental and physical health problems (Dulin-Keita et al., 2012).

All but one of the studies reviewed found a significant relationship between physical disorder and depression and anxiety related symptoms among children and youth, after controlling for demographic factors. In large, representative samples of adolescents in Los Angeles County and Baltimore, the presence of ambient hazards was related to each dimension of mental health including depression, anxiety, and oppositional defiant disorder as well as feelings of distrust, dejection, and anger (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996; Ewart & Suchday, 2002). Further, they found that African American youth were significantly more likely to be exposed to ambient hazards and that internalizing behaviors, particularly dejection and anger, were more salient among females (Ewart & Suchday, 2002).

Results from the Moving to Opportunity experiment, one of the few longitudinal, experimental studies in this area, found that young people who moved to neighborhoods with lower poverty experienced significantly less physical and social disorder and significantly greater neighborhood satisfaction. Further, these youth were significantly less likely to report anxiety and depressive problems than their peers who remained in higher poverty neighborhoods; these impacts were most pronounced among boys aged 8-13 (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2003). Longitudinal research conducted with a clinical sample of children with a family history of alcoholism also found that neighborhood instability had significant effects on all psychiatric symptomatology above and beyond the contribution of familial risk factors (Buu et al., 2009). Children whose neighborhoods became more stable over the course of a 12-year interval had fewer alcohol use disorder symptoms while those whose neighborhoods became less stable tended to have more depressive disorder symptoms than the controls.

Contradictory findings were reported with a sample of youth interviewed in emergency rooms after a suicide attempt. In this study, impoverishment (an index including the percentage of vacant properties in their neighborhood) was not predictive of hopelessness or depression (Perez-Smith et al., 2002). In another study focusing on three disadvantaged New York City neighborhoods, objective measures of physical and social disorder were not associated with children's depression (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2009). However, child reported neighborhood quality (including the child's perception of disorder) was significantly associated with depression. The researchers posit that the children's reports reflect a more proximal representation of their neighborhood and their own interpretations of disorder. For example, children's evaluations of neighborhood quality fully mediated the relationship between drug and alcohol related stressors (i.e., "I see drunks in my neighborhood") and depression because the children understood the

“stressor” differently than the researchers. The children’s answers reflected that they viewed those who engaged in loitering and drug activity as “familiar strangers,” without hostile intentions.

Though the majority of the studies reviewed utilized quantitative analysis methods, several of the studies also included a descriptive measure of child or parent perceived neighborhood disorder that sheds light on the mechanisms through which vacant properties exert their effects on children’s psychological well-being. As outlined above, Schaefer-McDaniel (2009) found that children’s perceptions of their neighborhoods were more predictive of depression than were census-derived variables related to neighborhood factors. Similarly, Ewart and Suchday (2002) found no significant associations between census related measures of deprivation and youth reported depression but did find significant associations between adolescents’ perceptions of neighborhood conditions and depression. One descriptive study focused on a sample of youth from juvenile justice facilities in Florida came to contrary conclusions. About half of the males (48.4%) and three quarters of the females (76%) reported that they did not feel that vacant houses were a problem in their community (Lane, 2009). The researchers speculated that justice involved youth may believe that they contributed to neighborhood disorder or may see the conditions as normal in their experience. Unfortunately, the researchers did not provide data to suggest whether or not the youth lived in neighborhoods with high levels of objectively measured disorder. In sum, the descriptive studies suggest that youth are able to report on conditions in their communities and that their interpretation of the meaning and relevance of these conditions may play a vital role in their mental health outcomes.

Overall, all but one quantitative study supported the empirical relationship between neighborhood physical disorder and mental health symptomatology among children and youth.

The results suggested that youth perception of disorder differed in important ways from census-derived measures of disorder; an important methodological consideration that points to the need for more youth-involved research. The two studies (one descriptive and one quantitative) that found evidence contrary to that presented above were based on unique clinical samples which may have contributed to the difference in findings. Taken together, these studies suggest the need for future research around young people's perception of neighborhood disorder and subsequent psychosocial outcomes.

### **2.1.3 Physical health**

The literature surrounding the impacts of the built environment on correlates of physical health has seen substantial growth in recent years. A considerable body of work has suggested that childhood injury and mortality are influenced by neighborhood factors including poverty and environmental factors like property vacancy. Childhood injury rates and early mortality are consistently higher among African American and low-income children and youth than their higher income, Caucasian counterparts (Cubbin & Smith, 2002; Shenassa, Stubbendick, & Brown, 2004; Wise, Kotelchuck, Wilson, & Mills, 1985). The literature suggests that neighborhood structural factors, including physical neighborhood characteristics and housing quality, are important predictors in the relationship between poverty, race, and child and youth injuries (Coulton, Crampton, Irwin, Spilsbury, & Korbin, 2007; Freisthler, Merritt, & LaScala, 2006; Merritt, 2009; Shenassa et al., 2004). Recently, researchers have shifted their attention to the impact of neighborhood disorder on public health problems, namely obesity and physical inactivity.

Political attention to epidemic rates of childhood obesity has driven researchers to look toward policy level, macro solutions to impact this troubling health trend. Numerous studies have connected features of the built environment including land use, sidewalk condition, safety, walkability, and access to outdoor exercise facilities to obesity and physical activity related variables. Fewer have incorporated disorder specific variables including social disorder (prostitution, drug sales, crime) and physical disorder (graffiti, litter, housing vacancy) (Davison & Lawson, 2006). A recent review outlines the findings of those that have incorporated disorder related variables and the findings are somewhat mixed.

Of 33 studies identified by Davison and colleagues (2006), 18 included measures of “local conditions” and their impact on children’s physical activity. Local conditions loosely referred to aspects of social and physical disorder as well as perceptions of safety. The studies ranged from samples of preschool aged children to high school aged youth. Among the studies addressing young people’s perceptions of safety and physical activity, 7 of 9 reported null findings. However, the authors report that this lack of association likely reflects the differing operationalization of disorder related variables. One study that looked specifically at a large urban sample of adolescents found that physical activity was largely explained by social disorder and neighborhood safety (Molnar, Gortmaker, Bull, & Buka, 2004). Most studies do not differentiate between a “general lack of tidiness” and higher level disorder, which makes it difficult to compare across studies (Davison & Lawson, 2006). Further, the literature can be critiqued for its lack of attention to differences in urban and rural areas as well as lack of differentiation of perceptions and outcomes across the life course.

Many of the current measures of walkability include items like residential density, land use, and parks and green space. However, they often fail to specify the impact of the condition

of these types of spaces (e.g., a well kept park versus an unkempt vacant lot) or to differentiate between the meaning of density in urban and suburban contexts (Lopez & Hynes, 2006; Neckerman et al., 2009). Features that make neighborhoods “walkable” for suburban residents including high residential density and good street connectivity are associated with higher levels of physical activity and lower levels of obesity. Despite the fact that most urban areas feature densely populated, well-connected streets, they do not see the same positive health outcomes that suburban residents in walkable neighborhoods enjoy (Neckerman et al., 2009). A low-density urban neighborhood may be the result of property abandonment and institutional disinvestment; government intervention likely would include tearing down vacant buildings resulting in vacant lots. Unfortunately, neighborhood conditions in walkable low income neighborhoods are significantly more disorderly than those in walkable non-poor neighborhoods (Lopez & Hynes, 2006; Neckerman et al., 2009). The impact of this disorder may be different at different life stages.

Not only might people be differentially exposed to disorder based on their developmental stage, the type of physical activity they take part in might look very different. Very young children’s exposure is largely dependent upon their parents’ perceptions of safety and play space availability while adolescents typically experience more freedom and spend more time “hanging around” in their neighborhoods (Papas et al., 2007). Studies that lump together all those under age 18 may be missing important distinctions in both environmental exposure and activity type. Bearing these limitations in mind, there are several important gaps in the existing research.

Scholars have stressed the need to consider the perceptions of residents across the life course, particularly in urban areas, to inform interventions and better understand the ways in which context of land use either promotes or impedes physical activity (Lopez & Hynes, 2006;

Papas et al., 2007). They have called specifically for more qualitative and participatory work to create new measures that best capture environmental factors that influence health (Papas et al., 2007; Redwood et al., 2010). Finally, they have argued that due to inconsistent measures and definitions of ecological context, the existing research may be missing key pathways through which the built environment exerts its influence on young people.

#### **2.1.4 A Note on Measurement Issues**

It appears that one of the most pressing issues brought up by the empirical research that addresses property vacancy is measurement. The primary measurement issue in the existing research is the wide variety of operational definitions that encompass vacant property related variables. Of the studies identified in this review, the majority conceptualized vacant properties as part of an index variable defined as incivilities, appearance, or neighborhood disorder. These studies typically combined measures of the built and physical environment with measures of social disorder including drug use and loitering; however, each definition differed somewhat. Two studies incorporated vacant properties into an impoverishment scale that measured such items as neighborhood poverty, racial composition, unemployment, and percentage of female-headed households. Another two studies incorporated vacant properties into a neighborhood stability scale measuring housing tenure, age, and neighborhood turnover. Finally, three more studies simply included vacant properties and the presence of residential deterioration as individual independent variables. This variety of definitions calls into question the validity of the measures and makes it difficult to compare across contexts.

This issue plagues neighborhood research because, until recently, most research that used neighborhood level variables merely aggregated individual data to the neighborhood level. Prominent researchers in the field have called for comprehensive neighborhood indicators that can be useful across context and provide valid, reliable measures with proven construct validity (Coulton & Korbin, 2007; Raudenbush & Sampson, 1999). Raudenbush and Sampson (1999) clearly articulate the need for neighborhood measures that are as psychometrically strong as existing individual measures:

The assessment of individual differences, building on decades of psychometric research, employs measures that have withstood rigorous evaluation...each scale includes many items; ill-performing items have been discarded and psychometric properties have been found to hold up in many settings. Without comparable standards to evaluate ecological assessments, the search for individual and ecological effects may overemphasize the individual component simply because the well studied psychometric properties are likely to be superior to the unstudied ecometric ones. (p. 3)

In order to improve validity and reliability of the existing instruments, researchers must work to understand the true underlying meaning of property vacancy, as defined by those who experience it, in order to understand how best to incorporate it into theoretical and quantitative models. As it stands, property vacancy is often confounded with a number of important correlates (e.g., poverty, instability, racial segregation) and efforts to disentangle these effects have had varied success (Evans, 2006; Sampson et al., 2002).

The research suggests that both subjective assessments and objective conditions affect perception of disorder, crime and other neighborhood factors (Caughy et al., 2003). Researchers must weigh the importance of generalizability against the need to incorporate geographically and



culturally sensitive measures that capture the nuances of the area under study. There is promise in the use of triangulation and mixed methods to limit same source bias and this type of error, so this effort should be continued (Caughy et al., 2001; Perkins & Taylor, 1996).

### **2.1.5 Summary of the Empirical Findings**

In summary, the majority of studies reviewed found that neighborhood physical disorder and vacant and abandoned properties significantly affect young people's psychosocial well-being. When it comes to physical health outcomes, it is clear that neighborhood features affect walkability and in turn, physical activity levels. What remains unclear is the specific role played by disorder in the built environment and how various features may exert a differential influence based on context (i.e., urban versus suburban) and at different stages in the life course. The findings suggest that neighborhood physical disorder (with an explicitly defined vacant property component) predicts, or at least correlates with, delinquency and high risk behaviors as well as mental health symptomatology among children and youth.

The findings suggest important considerations for vulnerable and diverse populations as well as important future directions for research. The studies consistently found that lower income and minority youth, particularly African American youth, were at higher risk for exposure to neighborhood disorder and ambient threats, thus placing them at risk for increased safety concerns (Aneshensel & Sucoff, 1996). Qualitative studies suggest the need for further exploration into young people's perceptions of their neighborhood and how those perceptions align with objective perceptions of disorder and their perceived well-being. This presents an opportunity for further qualitative inquiry into youths' definitions of disorder and how symbols

of disorder, including vacant properties, affect their daily routine and overall well-being with specific attention to lower income African American youth who appear to be most affected by these issues.

The research suggests that the built environment exerts its effect on young people across many health domains. However, mixed findings in the area and a lack of consistency in measurement suggest that perhaps researchers should take a step back to improve and standardize ecological measures. This underscores the need for qualitative research in the area because qualitative research can allow for rich interpretation of environmental features deemed most important by residents. These can be used to inform stronger research measures that perhaps better capture environmental variables as well as the most salient outcomes as perceived by young people who experience disorder in their day to day lives.

## **2.2 THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS**

This section will examine the most widely cited theories that have been used as the framework for empirical studies examining the relationship between blight in the physical environment and young people's well-being. The perspectives draw on aspects of a social and physical disorder framework so the following discussion will introduce those tenets. I will then outline social disorganization theory, a popular sociological school of thought regarding the impact of place on behavior. Following that, I will introduce broken windows theory, derived from the criminology literature. This theory specifically relates cues in the built environment to

the ways people behave and perceive their surroundings and is the framework I explore and extend in this dissertation.

### **2.2.1 Social and Physical Disorder: Setting the Context for a Theoretical Explanation**

The majority of empirical studies have incorporated vacant housing and blight in the physical environment into a physical and social disorder framework. In his landmark work, *Disorder and Decline*, Skogan (1992) described how visible cues in the neighborhood environment cause residents and outsiders to perceive a lack of order, control, and norms in a community. Social and physical disorder are often the most outward signs of an unstable neighborhood. Physical disorder refers to incivility in the built and physical environment and general appearance of a community (C.E. Ross & Mirowsky, 1999; Skogan & Lurigio, 1992). Signs of physical disorder include deteriorated, boarded, and abandoned buildings, graffiti, litter, overgrown lots, and overall dilapidation of the landscape (Perkins, Meeks, & Taylor, 1992; Perkins & Taylor, 1996). Social disorder refers to cues in the environment that involve people and may symbolize a lack of enforcement of positive norms and the absence of social control. Signs of social disorder include visible antisocial behavior such as prostitution, drug dealing, loitering, and panhandling (Raudenbush & Sampson, 1999; J. Q. Wilson & Kelling, 1982).

Physical and social disorder are not new concepts. Disorder has been studied since as early as 1925 when work out of the Chicago School of sociology focused on the relationships between neighborhood decay, pathological behavior, and mental health issues (Kruger, Reischl, & Gee, 2007; Park & Burgess, 1925). Work in the area received continued interest through the 1950s when Jane Jacobs (1961) described threats to neighborhood civility in public encounters in

the urban environment; encouraging urban design that kept “eyes on the street” to give the sense of social control. The historical and contemporary literature have shown consistently that people perceive physical and social disorder as an indication of potential for danger which leads them to feel threatened and distressed (Curry, Latkin, & Davey-Rothwell, 2008; Catherine E. Ross & Jang, 2000; C.E. Ross & Mirowsky, 1999). Residents of neighborhoods that are chronically exposed to the distress associated with decay and disorder, “develop heightened reactivity; they enter the stage of alarm more readily, quickly, and intensely, and they take longer to recover from it” (Hill, Ross, & Angel, 2005, p. 172). Understanding the concepts of social and physical disorder is necessary to fully understand the concept of broken windows theory and social disorganization theory, both of which will be discussed in the following sections.

### **2.2.2 Social Disorganization Theory**

Social disorganization theory is a highly influential theory utilized across disciplines to contextualize social problems including, but not limited to, neighborhood decline, juvenile delinquency, single parenthood, blight and property deterioration (Popkin et al., 2010; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Shaw, Zorbaugh, McKay, & Cottrell, 1929). The theory posits that there are three prime structural factors that have led to a decline in community social organization; low economic status, ethnic heterogeneity, and residential mobility (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Shaw et al., 1929) (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Shaw, et al., 1929). These factors are thought to combine to cause social disorganization, characterized by a lack of relationships within the community and thus, a lack of community control and norms.

Social disorganization theory holds strong explanatory value for the problem of vacant properties and the ways in which they affect young people. The characteristics that comprise socially disorganized communities and lead to juvenile delinquency act in a cyclical feedback pattern with the contextual factors that lead to property abandonment and blight. As noted by Wallace and Wallace (1990):

The consequences of withdrawing municipal services from poor neighborhoods, the resulting outbreaks of contagious urban decay and forced migration which shred essential social networks and cause social disorganization, have become a highly significant contributor to decline in public health among the poor. (p. 427)

Vacant properties are most heavily concentrated in neighborhoods characterized by low socioeconomic status, highly mobile residents, and minority ethnic composition (D. Wilson & Margulis, 1994). Residents who live on blocks with vacant properties are more likely to feel unsafe and desire to move than those who live on blocks without vacant properties (Andersen, 2008). Residential mobility increases and social control and collective efficacy decline; leading to socially disorganized communities that further perpetuate the problem of blight and disorderly behavior (Massey & Denton, 1993; W. J. Wilson, 1987).

This is particularly relevant to African American and low-income individuals who disproportionately reside in racially segregated, low socioeconomic status, and highly mobile neighborhoods. In the 1940s when Shaw and McKay identified ethnic heterogeneity as a key component of disorganization, cities in the United States were seeing an influx of poor immigrants from a variety of cultural backgrounds into slum areas of cities. They wrote that the lack of communication among adults (due in part to cultural and language barriers) resulted in a breakdown in social control and norm setting for youth in the community (1942). Today, in the

aftermath of years of urban policies aimed directly at the segregation of African Americans into ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods, it seems that ethnic homogeneity (indicative of segregation), rather than heterogeneity is now more closely connected to deleterious outcomes at the neighborhood level. Racism is a historic legacy that continues today; segregation of African Americans remains high and has acted to prevent economic mobility and cut off social control networks, particularly those in the public realm (Massey & Denton, 1993; Williams & Collins, 2001). Social disorganization theory provides strong support for the underlying mechanisms of community control that perpetuate physical and social disorder. However, several critiques of the theory bear further discussion.

First, the theory has been criticized for its assumption that there will be resident consensus on what behavior is normative and what behavior is disorderly. Residents may not be in agreement about what behavior constitutes a crime and, therefore, may apply social control differentially. Further, Shaw and McKay's (1942) original conceptualization of social disorganization assumed that neighborhoods were stable ecological structures. Further refinements to social disorganization theory have addressed this critique by recognizing that neighborhoods are affected by a variety of outside influences (e.g., municipal authorities, political bodies, police) that have a high degree of influence over the presence and policing of disorder.

Second, critics have suggested that the ways in which crime, disorder, and social disorganization have been measured are problematic. Early studies relied heavily on official crime reports as measures of crime and delinquency. Police bureau statistics only represent what is reported to the police and recorded, not all crimes. Unreported crime has been estimated at as

much as ten times the number of crimes reported to the police (Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Critics have also questioned the measures of dependent and independent variables.

The early empirical testing of social disorganization theory was confounded by the fact that researchers did not clearly differentiate between the outcome variable of interest, delinquency, and social disorganization (Bursik, 1988). Because of this lack of distinction, it seemed that delinquency was actually a feature of disorganization, which confounds the ability to understand and interpret the causal relationship that social disorganization theory would suggest. Overall, the research suggests that the systemic model of social disorganization, with some reservations, provides explanatory power and a useful framework for understanding the complex ways in which community physical and social factors can influence outcomes for young people.

### **2.2.3 Broken Windows Theory**

The primary theory I will use to frame this study is broken windows theory. Theories from the fields of criminology and law enforcement are applicable to the study of the effect of physical disorder because they attempt to explain how people interact with and are affected by the physical environment of neighborhoods. Though a number of criminological theories (see Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) (Cozens, Saville, & Hillier, 2005), defensible space theory (Newman, 1972), and routine activities theory (L. E. Cohen & Felson, 1979)) relate to features of the built environment and their impact on crime, the most frequently cited in the literature relevant to this paper is broken windows theory. Broken windows theory, originally introduced by Wilson and Kelling (1982) in a widely read Atlantic Monthly article, suggests that minor crime and social incivilities invite predatory crime because they cue potential

criminals that a neighborhood is indifferent and unwilling to intervene in crime (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Broken windows theory has received considerable buy in from policy makers and law enforcement bureaus who saw a manageable policing strategy that was lauded as the “magic bullet” to achieving a decline in violent crime. The following section will explore the empirical support and critiques of broken windows theory.

Broken windows theory, which rests on the notion that petty crime and visible disorder lead to the withdrawal of orderly residents and the onset of more serious crime, is popularly known among laypeople as well as social scientists. The theory, introduced in the 1980s by James Q. Wilson and George Kelling, built upon Wilson’s prior work that investigated the relationship between the daily hassles of urban life (e.g., deteriorated housing, panhandlers) and resident fear (Taylor, 1999; J. Q. Wilson, 1975). Broken windows theory extended this work to outline a causal process through which physical and social disorder lead to higher violent crime rates. Broken windows theory suggests that minor incivilities, left unrepaired, trigger a spiral of decay that leads to a breakdown of social order and an invitation to criminals.

The process begins with a minor incivility, such as a broken window. The sign of incivility is not the primary concern, but the community or resident response and the speed with which they address the issue. If a window remains broken or a house deteriorates over a period of time, residents conclude that other residents have given up and do not care what happens to the community. They determine that there is no sense of mutual obligation to enforce community norms and that social control is weak and withdraw from public spaces, fearing for their own safety. This withdrawal opens the door to petty criminals who engage in public intoxication, panhandling, and the like, which in turn causes residents to disengage.



As more normative residents disengage, the “eyes on the street”, that once maintained a sense of order are blinded (Jacobs, 1961). Over time, conditions deteriorate further and outside offenders become aware that the disorganized community is a place where more serious crime will go undeterred or undetected and crime rates increase (Taylor, 1999). They note the importance of time in predicting the consequences of disorder; it is posited as a sequential process of deterioration followed by delinquent and petty offenses, withdrawal of normative residents, and onset of serious crime (Taylor, 1999; J. Q. Wilson & Kelling, 1982). In later versions of the theory, Kelling outlines the role of the broader societal context on neighborhood crime and disorder including the role of the police.

Through the 1990s, Kelling worked closely with police departments and policy makers that put broken windows theory into action. This led to theory development specific to policing and intervention (Kelling & Coles, 1996). Later iterations of the theory criticized law enforcement officials’ focus on serious, violent crime as part of the reason for increases in disorder and, in effect, serious crime. They suggested a move toward “incivilities policing” and community oriented policing strategies to clean up petty crime and disorder. They suggest that certain neighborhoods that they call “teetering” are at a stage where they have fallen into disrepair but could be turned around through remediation of incivilities (Kelling & Coles, 1996). Further, they describe the specific role of the community based police officer; “to learn what conditions are troubling residents and merchants in these teetering neighborhoods and then help them address these concerns” (Taylor, 1999, p.69). This theory applies directly to the study of physical disorder and its impact on children.

Broken windows theory is applicable to the study of the effects of blight and physical disorder on young people because it focuses specifically on how deterioration in the built

environment affects the social fabric of communities and, in turn, resident and community outcomes. The theory incorporates the importance of visual cues of disorder, social withdrawal and isolation in promoting fear and in some cases deviance among youth. Specifically, youth who reside in “teetering” neighborhoods are exposed to physical incivilities that provide visual cues which, according to broken windows theory, cause a range of outcomes from fear and stress to delinquency (Taylor, 1999). Broken windows theory postulates a sequential process through which disorder exerts its influence on the well-being of both residents and neighborhoods.

Broken windows theory has been described as “enormously influential” on researchers, policy analysts, and police forces (Taylor, 1999 , p.68). This theory has received considerable attention and was, in part, responsible for a shift in policing strategies in New York City that targeted lower level public nuisances in an attempt to curb violent crime (Franzini et al., 2009; Perkins & Taylor, 1996). In the 1990s, during the height of a nation-wide crime wave, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani adopted a “broken windows policing” strategy (Messner et al., 2007). Some attribute the overall crime reduction in New York City to this strategy’s focus on cleaning up the then notorious subway system and petty criminals (e.g., “squeegee men” and panhandlers) (Kelling & Bratton, 1998). Several studies have confirmed these findings.

In a review of the empirical data in support of broken windows theory, Taylor (1999) outlines several studies that lend cross-sectional and longitudinal support for the proposition that perceived disorder predicts crime at the block level (Perkins et al., 1992). In one of the most widely cited studies of disorder, Perkins, Meeks, and Taylor (1992) interviewed residents and conducted neighborhood observations in Baltimore and found that physical disorder was independently related to resident perceptions of social incivilities and crime. Skogan and Lurigio (1992) attempted a longitudinal test of broken windows theory and interviewed resident leaders

in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to learn about their perceptions of disorder and crime. The results showed that perceived disorder reported in previous years was a strong predictor of current drug crimes in the community. Though these findings lend support for the basic premise of broken windows theory, more recent research has called into question the proposed causal relationship between incivilities and crime while still underscoring the connection between disorder and crime (Harcourt & Ludwig, 2006; Raudenbush & Sampson, 1999; Rosenfeld, Fornango, & Rengifo, 2007).

These studies have suggested that other factors mediate the relationship between disorder and crime and have focused primarily on the role of race and collective efficacy in shaping the perception and effects of disorder (Franzini, et al., 2009; Perkins & Taylor, 1996; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Collective efficacy, which in this case is defined as, “the fusion of social cohesion with shared expectations for the active social control of public space,” functions to reduce crime through cohesive resident networks and expected norms (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999 , p. 637). The most ambitious study that tests, and questions, the causal relationship between disorder and crime, was a large-scale assessment of 196 Chicago neighborhoods (the Project on Human Development in Chicago Neighborhoods (PHDCN)). They reported that unlike the broken windows theory assumption that observed disorder directly causes predatory crime; social disorder and crime are both the result of weakened social controls and a lack of neighborhood norms (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). In a later rebuttal, these findings were challenged; the authors suggested that the relationship between disorder and crime is not spurious, as thought by Sampson and Raudenbush (1999), but mediated by collective efficacy (Gault & Silver, 2008).

Most recently, researchers have begun to examine the demographic composition of neighborhoods as a predictor of the perception of disorder in the neighborhood (Franzini et al., 2009; R.J. Sampson & S.W. Raudenbush, 2004). The studies found that neighborhood poverty independently predicts perceptions of disorder. Black residents reported less disorder than their white counterparts in the same neighborhoods, which the authors attributed to black residents' increased likelihood to have been exposed to more disorder in the past (based on historical segregation and neighborhood patterns in Chicago). Interestingly, as the percentage of blacks in a neighborhood increased, so too did the perception of disorder, even among blacks (R.J. Sampson & S.W. Raudenbush, 2004). This suggests that disorder is socially constructed and is influenced by other neighborhood factors including racial and economic composition.

The original construction of broken windows theory neglected the role of race and poverty in shaping peoples' perceptions of disorder. Like social disorganization theory, broken windows theory operates under the implicit assumption that residents have a shared sense of what constitutes disorder and what is and is not normative community behavior. It fails to acknowledge the reality that race and poverty shape perceptions of disorder above and beyond the more objective visual cues of disorder. Overall, the research supports the idea that disorder and crime are linked but needs further development to truly understand the nature and direction of those connections.

## **2.2.4 SUMMARY OF THEORETICAL CONSTRUCTS**

A comprehensive framework for understanding the developing person within the context of a dynamic, changing neighborhood is elusive. Many theories exist to describe child and youth development while many others describe the life cycle and development of neighborhoods.

Social disorganization theory and broken windows theory are similar in that they attempt to explain the connection between visible signs of disorder, neighborhood problems, and criminogenic behavior. Though both theories initially set out to explain the role of incivilities in promoting crime, they have been applied widely to other outcomes including health, educational attainment, and social well-being (D. A. Cohen, Mason, et al., 2003; D. A. Cohen et al., 2000; G. J. Duncan & Raudenbush, 1999; Sampson & Morenoff, 1997). Though the theories are clearly applicable to other outcomes, the loose application and overlap between theories can lead to conceptual confusion and measurement issues. A vocal critic of the misuse of theory in social science research suggests that theories are added as an afterthought to make studies appear more rigorous and are often inappropriately applied (Thyer, 2008). This seems to be an appropriate critique of the use of theory in studies that examine neighborhood effects on children and youth.

A common critique of macro neighborhood theories is that they are used in a piecemeal fashion and not tested or adhered to with fidelity to the original models. Social disorganization theory and broken windows theory are often used interchangeably, as are many theories of disorder and decline. They are made up of different theoretical constructs, despite the similar behavior they set out to explain. I use broken windows theory as the primary framework for this dissertation with the aim of extending the theory through the lens of young people in a neighborhood hit hard by “broken windows.”

## 2.3 HISTORICAL AND CURRENT POLICY CHALLENGES

Briefly, the fight against blight began with the recognition that substandard housing conditions in inner cities were causing widespread disease and were potentially contagious for other city residents. A massive migration to the inner cities during the industrial revolution coupled with housing shortages led to overcrowding and unsanitary conditions in slums around the country (Perdue, Stone, & Gostin, 2003). Those with means began to move outside of inner cities, in part due to the deplorable conditions in cities but also because of federal policies incentivizing home ownership and outmigration (Shlay & Whitman, 2006). Progressives, spurred by exposés and famous muckraking works like Riis' *How the Other Half Lives*, worked vigorously to address the health and social concerns brought about by slum living (Riis, 1890).

The initial response was directed toward social and medically related concerns and was largely run by public health professionals. Later, the focus moved from individual and collective health to the built environment. Beginning with the establishment of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) in 1934 and moving through to the postwar period housing policies incentivized owner-occupied housing and the creation of interstate highway networks that allowed those with means to escape cities (Katz et al., 2000). This resulted in a profound demographic shift and decentralization of populations to outer ring suburbs and further deterioration of housing in central cities (Gotham, 2001). Overall, these policies have contributed to the conditions that create incentives to vacate and abandon properties (Accordino & Johnson, 2000).

### **2.3.1 Obstacles to transition, acquisition, and maintenance.**

Properties fall into disrepair quickly when they are not being lived in and maintained. Many local and state governments have adopted policies that require a lengthy administrative process that allows for properties, even once cited for code violations and tax delinquency, to continue to decay and further their risk of being deemed structurally unsound (Accordino & Johnson, 2000). While properties that are in violation of code or tax delinquent await disposition, whether that be tax sale, sheriff's sale, or housing court, they sit unoccupied and devalue proximate properties. In older industrial cities characterized by large and increasing numbers of vacant and abandoned properties, overwhelmed building inspectors must prioritize the most problematic properties because there is too little time and too few resources. For example, between 2008 and 2009 the City of Pittsburgh paid two full-time employees to board over 2600 properties and spent over \$5 million to demolish 547 abandoned homes; an average cost of over \$9,140 per building (Lamb, 2010; Wright, 2010). This leads the properties in the beginning stages of decay, those that would benefit from a rapid response and preservation plan, to fall through the cracks while attention is focused on the most imminently troubled properties.

In addition to the overwhelming outlay of time and resources spent on maintaining properties and enforcing code violations, there are several acquisition related barriers to addressing the problem of vacant houses. The administrative processes related to acquisition and transition of property has been described as "tortuous" (Accordino & Johnson, 2000). One of the most common reasons for properties becoming abandoned is the death of a person without a will. Even when next of kin are identified to inherit the home, it may be easier to abandon the property than to keep up with the taxes and maintenance, particularly in a distressed area. In

order to transition these properties, municipalities are required to wait a certain amount of time to initiate the tax sale process depending upon state law, generally two to four years (Accordino & Johnson, 2000). Clearing the title when no heir is identified can be even more time consuming. During the course of this potentially lengthy process of obtaining the title to a home, the home continues to fall into disrepair and exert a negative influence on the surrounding area.

In the following section, I will describe two types of interventions, mitigation interventions and adaptive interventions. Mitigation interventions aim to contain vacancy and blight through code enforcement strategies, tax sales, and other legal avenues. Adaptive interventions, on the other hand, aim to fill in the gaps of the mitigation interventions by building community capacity for dealing with vacancy and creating pathways for community residents to reclaim vacant properties.

## **2.4 MITIGATION INTERVENTIONS: CODE ENFORCEMENT AND TAX SALE**

Mitigation interventions work to stem the spread of vacant properties through municipal and state level legal avenues. The most commonly used strategies are property stabilization through maintenance code enforcement and the tax sale process (Accordino & Johnson, 2000). The code enforcement process is used for properties that present a health and safety hazard based on their dilapidated condition. The tax sale process, on the other hand, is used for properties that have been tax delinquent for some length of time and are acquired by municipal authorities through the tax foreclosure process.



The code enforcement process is used to apply punitive sanctions to property owners whose properties present a threat to public safety or are a nuisance that effects the quality and appearance of the area. Municipal building inspection and code enforcement bureaus monitor properties and cite owners for violations of the building code. Unfortunately, because of the extent of blighted and abandoned properties in older urban areas, the code enforcement process is reactive and does not keep up with demand (J. R. Cohen, 2001). The focus tends to be on property stabilization, through boarding up, to stunt the deterioration process, prevent infestation, and to deter illegal occupancy and use of the property (Accordino & Johnson, 2000). Tax sales, also a reactive approach, often require properties to be tax delinquent for lengths of a year or more before they can be addressed. As properties await disposition, they deteriorate and the court process is a significant expense for the municipality. Critics of the process have suggested a more proactive, community focused approach to addressing the vacant property problem.

In an example from Cleveland, a city that has suffered deeply from population loss and property abandonment, a creative program streamlined code enforcement by partnering with community development corporations to maintain a list of vacant properties, follow up on administrative issues (including attending housing court when necessary), and assist property owners in correcting code violations. The partnership considerably increased building inspection responsiveness and effectiveness by helping to manage some of the administrative duties and lighten the load on the overwhelmed inspectors (Frater, Gilson, & O'Leary, 2009). They also took on a preventative role and stopped properties from further deterioration by offering resources and incentives to property owners who needed to correct code violations.

Land banking, the process of strategically obtaining and holding properties for future use, is another proactive approach to property abandonment that holds promise as a way to stave off

deterioration and criminal activity in vacant homes (N.V.P.C., 2005). In older industrial cities that have experienced considerable population loss, the population is disproportionate to the available housing stock, which suggests that it is unlikely that all of the vacant homes will be in demand in the near future. This allows community groups to act as property managers for ongoing maintenance while they determine the best plan for the property, be that razing the property or rehabilitating it for re-use. This could help alleviate some of the more salient problems associated with vacant and abandoned properties including crime, exposure to toxins, decay, and decreasing property values.

## **2.5 ADAPTIVE INTERVENTIONS**

Recognizing that market forces, policy, and a number of other large scale structural factors impact housing vacancy rates; the following section will assume that though the vacant property problem can be mediated through consideration of the policy suggestions in the previous section it is unlikely to be fully mitigated. Neighborhood interventions that promote cohesion and collective efficacy, including the development of community groups and advocacy efforts, are a promising direction and an area where youth can be actively engaged.

Collective efficacy, social cohesion, and social support are thought to have the potential to mediate the negative effects of physical neighborhood disorder (Coulton et al., 1996; Cutrona, Russell, Hessling, Brown, & Murry, 2000; Geis & Ross, 1998; Perkins et al., 1992; Sampson & Groves, 1989). In order to help alleviate the problems associated with vacant and abandoned properties, the research suggests that developing and augmenting block and neighborhood

associations could be a promising pathway toward positive individual and community level outcomes (Garvin et al., 2012; Schilling, 2009). Resident participation in neighborhood associations has been associated with greater feelings of self-efficacy, collective efficacy, and sense of community (Ohmer, 2007). The literature suggests the development of neighborhood and block associations, based on their ability to promote social cohesion and undertake beautification activities, as a potential intervention (Perkins et al., 1992). Further, Perkins and colleagues (1992) suggest that, “community leaders and organizers might consider block clean-up activities as potentially delivering much more than merely a tidy street”, but potentially affecting the well being of block residents in a number of ways (p. 32).

Neighborhood groups have the ability to affect the vacant and abandoned property problem in several ways. Their first and most direct point of intervention is through their ability to intervene in instances of disorder through community clean ups and maintenance of property. Secondly, they foster collective efficacy through resident engagement. Collective efficacy predicts lower observed disorder even after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics, land use patterns, and perceived disorder (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999).

In addition to developing a sense of collective efficacy, research suggests that block groups and other neighborhood associations can work to organize residents to effect neighborhood change around vacant properties. Perceptions of disorder are influenced by neighborhood composition, both racially and economically, so community groups must go beyond beautification and clean up efforts to promote community well being on a long term basis (Franzini et al., 2009). Resident groups can advocate for policies that improve neighborhood conditions on a structural level, thus affecting the vacant property problem. On a macro scale, groups could organize around policies that impede neighborhood revitalization and

economic development (Franzini et al., 2009). There is promise in advocating for legal provisions that transfer ownership of abandoned properties to local government after a certain time period (Accordino & Johnson, 2000; McDonell, 2007). These types of activities could lead to a sense of community ownership that could, in turn, lead to informal social control that mediates the effect of vacant and abandoned properties (Perkins et al., 1992).

## **2.6 YOUTH PARTICIPATION: WHY ADOLESCENTS?**

This study aimed to better understand the ways in which vacant properties exert an impact at the individual and community level. Seeking the opinion of adolescents on this issue not only fills an important gap in the extant research, but it recognizes that adolescents are uniquely affected because they tend to spend more time outside in their neighborhood than children or adults. Adolescents are transitioning from childhood to adulthood, a time when they gain independence and become more active around the neighborhood. Further, youth in the middle childhood to adolescent life stage are more prone to the outside influence of peers and other community influences (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The research suggests that lower income, minority youth have the highest exposure to outdoor neighborhood factors due to their likelihood to actively commute to school.

African American and Hispanic teenagers who come from lower income families, live in urban areas, and attend public school have the highest rates of active commuting (i.e., walk, bike, or skateboard) (Babey, Hastert, Huang, & Brown, 2009). Further, adolescents without an adult present to meet them after school, and whose parents know little about their whereabouts after

school are the most likely to actively commute. Youth in neighborhoods with high levels of perceived incivilities, including social and physical disorder, are more likely to walk to school despite the fact that they report lower levels of perceived safety; suggesting that poor children and teenagers walk to school out of necessity (Rossen et al., 2011). In these daily journeys on foot through the neighborhood, youth are exposed to a number of risks in the built environment that include exposure to illicit activities, violence, and visible disorder. Because youth are among the most vulnerable populations when it comes to exposure to hazards in the built environment, it is an important area for social work researchers to address.

### **2.6.1 Barriers to youth involvement**

The involvement of youth in research can be controversial for many reasons. The old adage that children should be “seen and not heard” still has a strong foothold in American society. Child and youth participation and empowerment challenges deeply held notions of the power differential between young people and adults and can, therefore, cause unease among adults (Pontón & Andrade, 2007). Other challenges inherent in this work include the fact that youth involvement often leads to a process of discovery and sharp observation of salient community issues that can lead to discouragement. In order to address the potential for research to lead to discouragement and personal difficulties for youth, researchers can build in opportunities for youth to process and reflect upon what these challenges mean and perhaps to develop resiliency in the face these challenges (Nicotera, 2008). Youth involved research should provide opportunities for youth to develop agency and self-efficacy while still helping them understand that political and social limitations may hamper their progress.

Despite the challenges, opportunities to develop civic engagement and self empowerment skills are a key piece of the overall puzzle when it comes to working with youth to address the problem of vacant and abandoned properties. Development of these types of skills has been associated with increased self esteem, sense of caring for the local environment, desire to participate in socially positive behaviors, and acceptance of diversity of people and ideas (Balsano, 2005; Nicotera, 2008). These skills will serve youth and communities simultaneously. Youth will have an opportunity to develop on a personal level and their participation will help communities gain strength. If youth are able to develop and take a strong leadership role in defining what they want to see in their built environment, the youth and their communities will both be beneficiaries.

## **2.6.2 Argument for Inclusion of Youth Voices and Advocacy**

The evidence suggests that one of the strongest ways to influence the problem of vacant and abandoned properties is engaged community members who are able to organize and advocate on a broader policy level. However, few studies of the impacts of vacant properties have incorporated samples of children and youth and even fewer have examined the involvement of youth in policy advocacy (Nepomnyaschy & Reichman, 2006; Rountree & Land, 1996). This is an area that needs a deeper look in terms of both empirical research and intervention. The involvement of youth in neighborhood planning and organizing processes can be a useful intervention in two ways, first, youth receive positive personal development opportunities and second, it can work to transform they physical and social environment of neighborhoods—further improving the potential for positive youth outcomes.

Youth led community organizing and advocacy is not a new concept. Though there is a lack of acknowledgement of youth's role in many key social shifts in the United States, from the fight for independence to the Civil Rights movement, there has been growing recognition of youth movements since the 1960's (Delgado & Staples, 2008). Many studies have found that youth have the capacity and will to provide valuable, perceptive assessments of their surrounding environment (Loebach & Gilliland, 2010; Nicotera, 2008; Sutton & Kemp, 2002). Further, participatory methods have grown in popularity as a research and advocacy tool with particular success around environmental health issues (Minkler, Garcia, Williams, LoPresti, & Lilly, 2010). There is space for a social work perspective in this growing effort.

The logical next step to move beyond tokenism and into a realm where youth are full partners in the future of their local environments is to utilize participatory research practices that move beyond data collection. Youth input is an important first step but if that input is then interpreted and used only by adults, the process may, in fact, become disempowering for youth. Research that moves from data to policy to action can help bridge that gap. A model of participation that allows for youth development and civic engagement fits within the historical tradition of youth-led community organizing and has strong promise for interventions and advocacy related to neighborhood problems.

## **2.7 SUMMARY**

The extant research clearly shows that features of the built environment and vacant properties, in particular, are associated with fear, anxiety, depression, delinquency, and

externalizing behaviors as well as negative health behaviors and outcomes among young people. There are several limitations in the existing literature, most notably the fact that the authors of recent studies have noted a need to involve residents and youth in reporting on their own well being as it relates to neighborhood environmental features. Specifically, there is a need for youth to identify which issues are the most salient to their well-being in order to better direct future work in the area (Perez-Smith et al., 2002; Schaefer-McDaniel, 2009). Barriers to youth participation in research on their own well-being exist, but there is a rich tradition of youth involvement and participation in action and advocacy that can be translated to research. The literature suggests that features of the built environment may have important implications for young people's well being and that there is a need for studies that directly involve youth in identifying and addressing features they deem are most important. A mixed methods, participatory approach is well suited for exploring these dimensions of young people's well being because it allows them active agency in determining both the correlates and outcomes that are most salient. These perceptions will bolster the existing research and could lead to models and theories that better estimate key factors affecting young people's well being.



### **3.0 METHODS**

The literature on how the built environment affects young people has identified a number of important pathways through which property abandonment and blight may exert an influence on young people. However, what is lacking is an in-depth understanding of the perspectives of young people. Young people's experiences of space and place shape their exposure to and perception of environmental hazards. A multi-method approach is the most appropriate way to explore this because it will allow for a deeper understanding of what features of neighborhoods are seen as most important to youth which can guide a spatial analysis of how these hazards shape neighborhood life for young people. The existing research has been criticized for a lack of consistency in definitions of disorder, partially because researchers have interpreted property vacancy as symbolizing a variety of factors from economic disinvestment to social disorganization. It is unknown whether residents and in particular, young people, define vacant properties as a sign of impoverishment, instability, incivilities, or something else entirely. This study proposes an iterative mixed methods approach to better understand youth reports of what environmental features are most important to them, how those features affect them, and what they mean in a community context.

This study, guided by participatory principles, examines data collected from three separate studies and aims to understand how youth experience and interpret cues in the

neighborhood built environment. This mixed method approach aims to triangulate multiple sources of data in order to provide an enriched interpretation of the vacant property phenomenon. This will help to better frame the discussion of how features of the built environment affect young people by asking them directly to inform a larger spatial analysis. This incorporates traditions of CBPR, bottom up GIS, quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Chapter three summarizes the research design and methods used in this study. I begin by outlining the research question and primary objectives of the study. Next, I provide a rationale for using a community based participatory research (CBPR) approach and introduce the concept of participatory GIS. I then describe the study site, detail the sample, procedures, and analysis for each study and finish with a description of how the three studies are brought together through an integrated analysis process. I conclude the chapter with methodological limitations.

### **3.1 RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIVES**

As outlined in the introduction, several research questions guide this study. They are as follows:

- 1) What meaning do young people ascribe to vacant properties in a community with high levels of vacancy?
- 2) What do young people perceive as the effects of vacant properties on their own well-being and that of their community?
- 3) How do young people experience, characterize, and internalize vacant property related cues in their neighborhoods?

### **3.2 COMMUNITY BASED PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH**

Community Based Participatory Research (CBPR) is an approach to research that incorporates a mandate to conduct studies that benefit both the researcher and community residents and that seeks to meaningfully address social and health related issues (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). CBPR is not a research method but an approach that highlights key principles including cooperative, equal partnerships between researchers and community members, a process of co-learning, systematically developing community and resident capacity, empowerment, and a balance between research and action (B.A. Israel, Eng, Schulz, & Parker, 2005; Wallerstein & Duran, 2008). There is no exact set of principles that must be adhered to; each partnership must work to define their own guiding principles within this framework (B.A. Israel et al., 2005). CBPR involves a long-term commitment by both the researcher and community members to address social problems in order to be effective.

CBPR has proven particularly effective in underserved communities in part because it deviates from the positivist scientific tradition and places equal value on indigenous knowledge, different forms of expertise, and research that has practical benefits to community members (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2011). The strengths of the CBPR approach are tailored well to the research questions and primary aims of this dissertation; to understand the lived experiences of young people and to engage them in identifying solutions to entrenched neighborhood problems.

Through this process, I worked with young people in a collaborative effort to catalogue and characterize environmental disparities. Among the benefits of the CBPR approach are an appreciation for local and contextual knowledge of participants, larger aims to improve community well-being, and the production of knowledge that is useful for practice and that can

be applied in the community (B. A. Israel et al., 1998). This approach aligns closely with social justice values and is most appropriate to create an environment in which youth are empowered to participate meaningfully in research and through which I maintained and strengthened my commitment to the existing CBPR partnership.

### **3.2.1 Participatory GIS**

Over the last 20 years, the use of GIS and spatial methods has exploded. Though once considered as squarely in the quantitative, positivist tradition, recent developments challenge this through the development of critical GIS. Several movements including participatory GIS, critical GIS, and “bottom up” GIS bring a feminist, inductive, and participatory framework to bear on mapping and geovisualization (Dennis, 2006; Elwood, 2006; Pavlovskaya, 2009; Talen, 2000). These qualitative and participatory approaches to GIS and community planning are relevant to social workers but they are primarily published in discipline specific journals that focus on geography and planning that typically fall outside exposure to a mainstream social work audience.

Growing interest in understanding the macro settings in which our clients reside has driven a push toward better understanding of tools to examine these macro environments including GIS. Several vocal critics in social work who have led a push for social workers to focus on neighborhoods and macro environmental factors stressed the utility of GIS in this type of work (Coulton et al., 1996; Dennis, 2006; Hillier, 2007). Social workers are in a unique position to use critical GIS and challenge the top down approach that typically comes to mind when thinking of high cost, technically sophisticated software such as GIS. As Emily Talen, the

mother of the “Bottom Up GIS” movement noted, “Rather than ‘experts’ using GIS strictly to *inform* in top-down fashion, GIS can be used in a bottom-up way that lets residents characterize their local environment. I have dubbed this approach ‘Bottom-Up GIS’ (BUGIS).” (Talen, 2000, p. 280).

Effective use of community mapping can be used to integrate multiple forms of knowledge including administrative data, resident created data, and other non-traditional sources such as photographs and narratives. The use of these multiple perspectives allows for triangulation and enriched interpretation of the data which also lends itself to process validity (Khobzi & Flicker, 2010). Further, the use of participatory mapping can shift the power dynamics from the government and planning agencies, who typically have access to GIS, to the hands of community members; placing data and interpretation in the hands of residents facilitates empowerment (Dennis, 2006; Dennis et al., 2009). This study will be framed broadly by CBPR ethics and principles and will be further guided by a qualitative and participatory GIS approach.

### **3.3 SITE FOR DATA COLLECTION**

The Homewood neighborhood of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, was the primary site for data collection. Homewood is a one square mile neighborhood located on the east end of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At its peak, in the 1940s and early 1950s, Homewood was an ethnically and racially diverse middle-income community of more than 31,000 residents, with a thriving business district, strong public schools, tree-lined streets and well-maintained homes (J. Wallace & Teixeira, 2013). Today, Homewood is an economically challenged, racially segregated

neighborhood (96% African American) whose population has decreased by nearly 80 percent to only 6,442 residents (of whom 1,798 are children under 18 years of age) (Census, 2010).

Although Homewood has a rich history and many assets, it is also plagued with the social problems that characterize economically disadvantaged communities across the nation. These problems include high rates of school failure, unemployment, welfare dependency, crime and property abandonment, all of which have been linked to adverse effects on adolescent well-being (J. Wallace & Teixeira, 2013). According to the Census Homewood's children and families are among the most impoverished in Pittsburgh. More than 32% of Homewood families (and more than 60% of its children) live below the federal poverty level and nearly 90% of its public school students are eligible for free or reduced lunch (Census, 2010). Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash assistance and food stamp eligibility rates are more than double those for the City of Pittsburgh (TANF 10% and food stamps 21%) (D.H.S., 2009). Homewood's parents are struggling and lack formal work opportunities; 26% of adults do not have a school diploma; only 45% are in the workforce and roughly 40% of those who work earn less than \$15,000 per year. Half of all Homewood residents report that they do not have access to a vehicle, further complicating their opportunities to find work and access services outside of the neighborhood (Census, 2010).

Homewood's youth face challenges across many dimensions including academic performance, social service utilization, and crime. Because of its high dropout rate (58%), Westinghouse high school in Homewood was identified as a "dropout factory" (i.e., a high school in which 60% or fewer students graduate). Comparatively, students in 99% of Pennsylvania's K-8 schools and high schools scored higher than students in Homewood's Faison K-8 and Westinghouse 9-12 (J. Wallace & Teixeira, 2013). Further, Homewood has one of

Allegheny County's highest out-of-home placement rates for abused, neglected or abandoned children (188 in 2007) and the largest number of children referred to the Allegheny County Juvenile Court Probation office (145 in 2007) (D.H.S., 2009). Homewood also has had the largest number of homicides (76 between 1997 and 2009) in Pittsburgh, the largest number of gangs of any neighborhood in Pittsburgh and has among the highest violent crime rates in the city (D.H.S., 2009). With all these challenges, the physical environment shows the wear of the social problems affecting Homewood.

More than 60% of neighborhood residents are renters, leading to a transient population and a lack of long-term investment in Homewood (Census, 2010). The average home in Homewood is over 90 years old (i.e., built circa 1920), 26% of Homewood's buildings are vacant, 57% of the parcels, which include land and structures, in the neighborhood are vacant, and the average non-vacant residential home sale price in 2009 was \$9,152 (compared to \$90,491 for the rest of the city) (U.C.S.U.R., 2011; Zuberi et al., 2013). This overview of the Homewood community highlights the needs and challenges faced by Homewood youth.

Operation Better Block, Inc. (OBB) has been working to improve conditions in the Homewood community for more than forty years. They are a well-respected community organization that has worked to restore the fabric of the Homewood community by organizing and mobilizing residents. In 2010, OBB expanded their services to include a youth development program called the Junior Green Corps (JGC). The JGC offers summer employment and after-school programming to twenty high school aged youth who reside in Homewood and neighboring communities. Young people receive a stipend of \$20 per day to participate in the summer employment program and \$5 per day to participate in the after school program. The JGC is coordinated by two full time staff people and one to two AmeriCorps members who

provide daily supervision and plan activities for the students. The primary goals of the JGC program are to provide structured activities that help youth make an impact on the neighborhood's physical environment, equip them for leadership roles in the community, improve academic outcomes, and provide an opportunity to explore green collar jobs and careers (see <http://juniorgreencorps.tumblr.com/program>).

### **3.3.1 CBPR with Operation Better Block, Inc.**

One component of establishing credibility in qualitative research is the researcher's experience and embeddedness in the community under study (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). In order to begin to establish the credibility of my findings, this section and the next address my prolonged involvement in the Homewood community and my own positionality as a researcher. In addition to aligning with best practices in qualitative research, one of the foundational tenets of CBPR is a long-term commitment and partnership with the community. Bearing this in mind, I have worked with the JGC and OBB for more than four years in a number of different roles. This resulted in a trusting and symbiotic partnership that made this research possible. The following will outline the formation and maintenance of this partnership.

I began my work with OBB after taking a CBPR course located within Homewood in 2007. The professor who taught the course, Dr. John Wallace, was also the board president of OBB. Dr. Wallace helped me gain entrée into the community and through this relationship, I was able to begin working with OBB first as a volunteer and later as a full time community based researcher with an office alongside OBB staff. Here, I worked closely with community organizers and began my first partnership with the JGC which was in its inaugural year. Though



I did not have a formal role with the JGC at this stage, I would often find myself sharing lunch with the young people and later tagging along with them on their vacant lot cleanups. This time was formative in the development of my research agenda and my dissertation research.

My specific role as a community based researcher was to conduct an assessment of neighborhood conditions in Homewood and when I engaged the youth as research assistants, I was surprised by their insight and ability to notice, and overlook, places and features that were of key importance to non-community research assistants. Their keen eyes led me to wonder what else they might have to share about their community and formed the basis for my application for the Schweitzer Environmental Fellowship to get support for doing direct service work and research to delve more deeply into this topic.

As I conceptualized what would later become a major component of my dissertation research (see Study 2), I worked closely with OBB and JGC staff in order to come up with a project that was beneficial to the youth, the organization, and me. One of the mandates set forth by the funders of the JGC was that youth must be engaged in an ongoing community planning process. So, we conceived a project that would allow youth to discuss strengths and weaknesses in the built environment of Homewood in hopes that their thoughts could be used in an ongoing community development process. All the while, I spent the course of the summer and fall as a Schweitzer Environmental Fellow working directly with the JGC program and was able to develop a strong rapport with the youth by participating in daily tree planting, vacant lot cleaning, community gardening, and educational activities. At the end of the summer, I approached the youth with my proposal and they seemed excited and genuinely interested in the project. Throughout the course of the project I worked within the confines of the youth's schedules to conduct neighborhood tours and discussion groups. I strived to give the youth as

much choice in the process as possible allowing them to deviate from the research questions in order to promote good discussion and other, simpler things such as choosing their own snacks for each session. After the completion of my fellowship, I continued to maintain a relationship with the young people through volunteering and tutoring with the JGC.

### **3.3.2 Positionality**

In qualitative data collection and CBPR, it is important to consider the researcher's life experiences and positionality. My own life experiences shape how I interpret the data and engage in the process of partnership, thus I must be aware of my own perspectives and my positions of power, privilege, and oppression (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006). Over the years, I have developed a strong rapport with past and present JGC participants, numerous professional relationships, and close friendships with members of the Homewood community. However, I remain an outsider. I write as a white female who was raised in a low SES rural home in an entirely white town. My high level of education separates me from my family who is primarily high-school educated. My white skin belies the challenges in which I was raised.

When the youth discuss teen parenting, relatives addicted to drugs and incarcerated, and growing up with few financial resources, they find it hard to believe when I tell them I can relate. Though my challenges have been few in comparison to theirs, it is important to note some of these personal experiences to qualify how I relate to the youth, how my background may influence a common language between us, and how I might understand their values, norms, and beliefs both differently and similarly to how they do. I was born to a seventeen year old mother and a heroin addicted father. My father left us when I was young but I was lucky enough to be

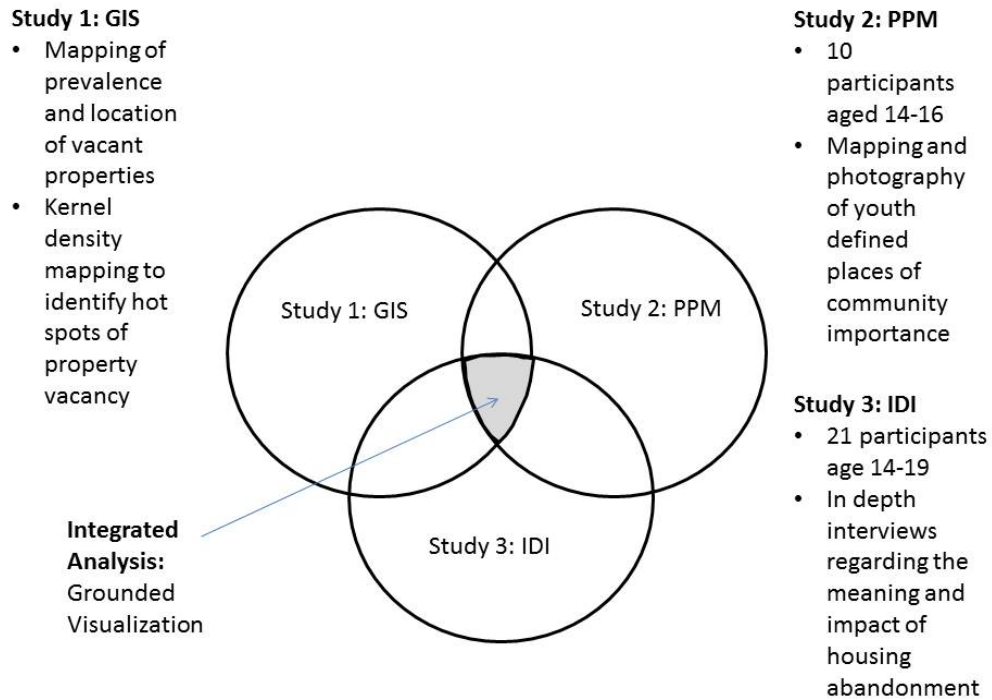
raised by a kind and hard working stepfather from the age of seven. Despite my parents' best efforts, my younger brother has struggled with addiction and mental illness throughout his life and is currently serving a prison term while my mother raises his two toddlers. I went on to higher education and live in an affluent Pittsburgh neighborhood just two short miles from the poverty and challenges of Homewood. It is important to consider this background because one might imagine the young people in Homewood have a different impression of my upbringing when I am introduced as a white university student that bears a close resemblance to teachers and service providers they have had in the past.

One of the challenges of achieving a true CBPR partnership is the notion that, "We may imagine we are walking into a community representing our own backgrounds, our current realities, and our research projects. Yet we may be viewed through the lenses of multiple contexts, including our own multiple histories...some of which we may know nothing about or do not expect" (Wallerstein & Duran, 2006 , p. 313). Throughout the data collection and analysis process, I have attended to my various positionalities and how they may have affected my interpretation of the data, my ability to collaborate as a partner, and my relationships with the research partners. I recognize that I am a white researcher interpreting the experiences of youth of color and have attempted to approach the analysis from a position of cultural humility and to check in at each stage of the research to ensure that my interpretations fit within the cultural context of their experiences (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998).

### **3.4 DATA COLLECTION**

In this section, I will describe three separate and distinct studies. These studies, taken together, are the basis for the integrated analysis that informs the results section of the dissertation (see Figure 1). The triangulation of these three rich sources of data on the prevalence of property abandonment and its correlates in Homewood and youths' interpretations of its meaning provides an in-depth understanding of the meaning and implications of property abandonment for Homewood youth. I begin by describing Study 1, a GIS analysis of the prevalence of housing vacancy and its correlates. Next, I describe Study 2, which was a participatory photo mapping project that engaged Homewood youth in identifying key built environmental issues. This is followed by Study 3, which consisted of in-depth interviews of Homewood youth to more fully understand their interpretations of the meaning of property abandonment. Finally, I describe the grounded visualization process, which was used to integrate these three sources of data to address the research questions.

**Figure 1: Study Design**



### **3.5 STUDY 1: GIS ANALYSIS OF PREVALENCE OF HOUSING VACANCY**

Study 1 used Geographic Information Systems (GIS) to examine the prevalence of housing vacancy in Pittsburgh and, specifically, Homewood. This section will describe the sample and data sources for the study followed by a detailed description of the procedures and data analysis.

### **3.5.1 Sample Description**

The sample for this study included all land parcels in the City of Pittsburgh from which a subsample of parcels located in Homewood North, Homewood South, and Homewood West (referred to collectively as Homewood) were drawn. In total, there are 5,187 total parcels within the boundaries of Homewood. Of these, 2,211 are occupied, 2,209 are vacant land parcels, and 767 are vacant buildings.

#### **3.5.1.1 Data Sources**

Several data sources were utilized for the GIS analysis. The following data sources made up the GIS database (aka, geodatabase) used for this study.

##### ***Decennial Census***

The decennial census provides a rich source of population data at multiple levels of aggregation. For the purposes of GIS mapping, the census maintains several important sources of data. The first is raw tables of demographic data. These data tables are publicly available for download at the census.gov website. For this study, I utilized sociodemographic data including population by census tract and block group and racial makeup. The second component offered publicly via the US Census is a collection of shapefiles. GIS maps are comprised of a series of tables (the data), shapefiles (a non-topological format for storing geometric location and attributed geographic features), and layers (the visual representation of spatial data, essentially a legend item on a map) (Gorr & Kurland, 2008). I obtained some of the shapefiles for this study including census tract, block group, and city boundaries from the census.gov website. These files, known as TIGER (Topologically Integrated Geographic Encoding and Referencing) files,

represent the census' most comprehensive dataset and are formatted for use with ArcGIS software. I also obtained shapefiles and locally relevant administrative data from other publicly available sources including the City of Pittsburgh planning website (see <http://pittsburghpa.gov/dcp/gis/gis-data>) and through existing relationships with Pittsburgh-based mapping professionals.

### ***Pittsburgh Neighborhood and Community Information System (PNCIS)***

For property-related problems, neighborhood indicator data are particularly useful because they are collected at a more granular level than census data and can be used to pinpoint problem areas (e.g., vacancy, crime, tax delinquency) and strengths (e.g., schools, parks, institutional assets) (Teixeira & Wallace, 2013). The National Neighborhood Indicators Partnership (NNIP) is a consortium of organizations that run advanced information systems on neighborhood conditions in 36 cities across the United States and is a resource for these more granular, neighborhood level data (See <http://www.neighborhoodindicators.org/about-nnip>). Among the benefits of using NNIP data are the ability, as researchers, to share experience and replicate findings across cities, circumvent inefficiencies in administrative data collection and aggregation, and drill down to the neighborhood level without laborious and expensive primary data collection (Howell, Pettit, Ormond, & Kingsley, 2003). For this study, I obtained data from Pittsburgh's local NNIP partner, the Pittsburgh Neighborhood and Community Information System (PNCIS), housed at the University Center for Social and Urban Research (UCSUR).

The PNCIS dataset includes a wide range of property-related neighborhood indicators at the parcel level, including tax delinquency status, property ownership, and building inspection code violations. Though aggregate PNCIS data are available through a geospatial web 2.0

platform created with the intent to share data in a layperson friendly format, I obtained the data in their raw form in order to manipulate them along with other data in ArcGIS software. I was also able to obtain data that are not typically available to lay-users through a data sharing agreement. These data included parcel level United States Postal Service (USPS) postal vacancy data from August of 2013. USPS vacancy data, collected monthly, are thought to be the most accurate representation of current vacancy conditions and meet exacting quality standards set by the USPS (S. W. Whitaker & Fitzpatrick, 2012). Mail carriers observe addresses each day when they deliver mail and record homes when they have been vacant for more than 90 days; the dataset is reported to have an accuracy level above 95% (S. W. Whitaker & Fitzpatrick, 2012). PNCIS staff also provided me with juvenile crime arrest data by location and type of arrest. These data are provided to the PNCIS through a data sharing agreement with the Pittsburgh Bureau of Police and follow the conventions of the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) Uniform Crime Reporting System (UCRS).

### ***OBB surveys 2009-2013***

Beginning in 2009 and continuing through the present, each summer OBB has conducted foot surveys and visual property inspections in targeted areas throughout Homewood. I oversaw the first iteration of these surveys in my position as a research associate with OBB and they have since been taken over by another staff member focused on community development. The visual surveys follow a standardized protocol in which staff members walk the survey area and conduct parcel-by-parcel visual inspections of land and buildings and utilize a handheld device to record the parcel's condition and occupancy status. For each survey, the research coordinator surveys each property once and records its status. A community organizer then surveys it a second time



and attempts to make contact with residents of occupied properties. If there is disagreement about a property, (e.g., labeled occupied by the research coordinator and vacant by the community organizer) the coordinator and a staff member go out together to make the final determination of occupancy.

### **3.5.2 Procedures**

Several steps were required to bring all of the datasets described above together into a combined database for geographic analysis. These steps included creating a geodatabase, joining tables to the appropriate shapefiles, and “clipping” the City of Pittsburgh data files to the Homewood neighborhood shapefiles. I also had to hand transcribe points from paper maps onto the GIS map and perform a data transformation to prepare for analysis. This section will describe each of these procedures.

A geodatabase is a file storage unit for data in ArcGIS. I began by cleaning all of the data tables using Microsoft Excel and importing them into the geodatabase. I then performed spatial joins to connect the data tables to shapefiles and to merge various sources of data together. For this, ArcGIS has a tool known as “joins and relates.” Data can be joined based on spatial location (e.g., arrest location points can be joined to block groups based on which block group they fall inside) or based on attributes from tables. When data are joined based on table attributes, one joins the two tables together based on a field that both tables share. The survey data from OBB and the USPS data had a parcel number field which was identical to the parcel number field in the parcel boundary shapefile so I used this common field to join the two datasets to each other and to the parcel boundary shapefile (in effect creating a comprehensive, spatially referenced

data table for use in ArcGIS). The parcel level data tables were then spatially joined by location to the census tract and block group in which they belonged.

In order to draw maps that included only Homewood and the surrounding communities, I had to clip the datasets and shapefiles. Clipping is a geoprocessing tool available in ArcGIS that can be used to cut out an area of interest from a larger map. Each Pittsburgh shapefile and associated data table had to be clipped to the Homewood neighborhood features. I created a combined Homewood shapefile which included Homewood North, South, and West and saved that as a separate shapefile to be used for the clipping process. Then, I used this file as a “cookie cutter” to clip all of the features (i.e., streets, parcel boundaries, block group boundaries) to Homewood’s boundaries (Esri, 2008) (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2: Geoprocessing with the Clip Tool**



I also performed a data transformation on the parcel level vacancy data provided by the USPS. These data are polygon features and in order to create a “heat map” showing hotspots of

property vacancy in Homewood, I needed to convert the polygons into points<sup>2</sup>. Within ArcGIS 10, I used the “calculate geometry” tool to calculate latitude and longitude for the center of the polygon. I then saved the resultant centroids as a point file, which I used for the kernel density analysis described in the next section (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: Parcel Polygons with Block Centroid Points**



### 3.5.3 Data Analysis

The goals of the GIS data analysis were to examine the prevalence and density of housing vacancy and other outcomes of interest. I used GIS to examine these issues first by creating descriptive choropleth maps illustrating population, demographic makeup, and housing

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<sup>2</sup> There are two primary types of spatial data utilized in GIS analysis; vector data and raster data (Gorr & Kurland, 2008). Vector data include features such as points (e.g., arrest locations), lines (e.g., streets), and polygons (e.g., census tracts). Raster data are a matrix of pixels where each cell represents information (e.g., elevation, land use, temperature).

conditions and occupancy at both the city and the neighborhood level. I then used kernel density mapping techniques to analyze hotspots of property vacancy in Homewood at the parcel level.

### 3.5.3.1 Chloropleth maps

Chloropleth maps are descriptive, thematic maps that represent classed values or categories using different colors or shades (Esri, 2008). I created chloropleth maps to examine land use (e.g., using different colors to represent parcels with different land uses or occupancy statuses) and demographic features (e.g., population over time by area of the city). Figure 4 shows an example of a chloropleth map.

**Figure 4: Example of a Categorical Chloropleth Map**

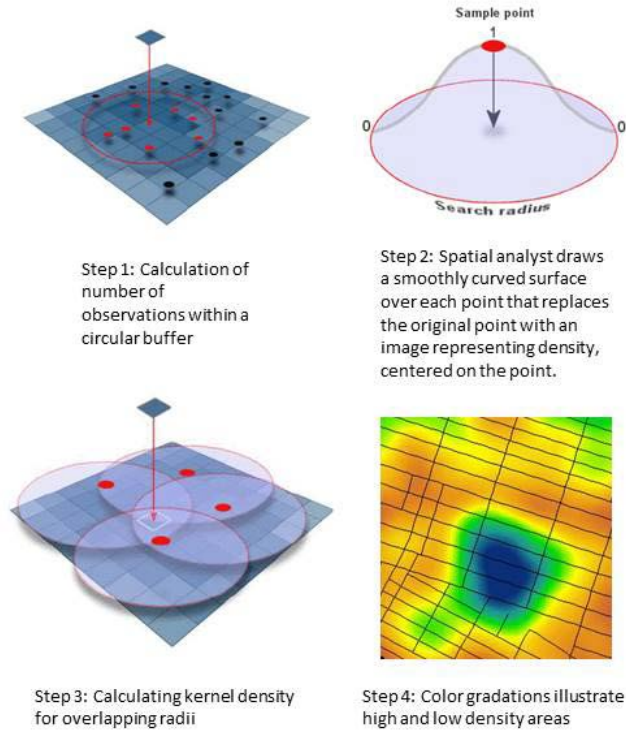


### **3.5.3.2 Kernel density maps**

Kernel density estimation, often known as hotspot mapping, is a spatial analysis technique that uses color gradations to illustrate spatial variations in the density of an attribute. In order to analyze hotspots, I used the spatial analyst tool within ArcGIS 10.0. To perform the calculation, point data are aggregated within a user-defined radius. The spatial analyst tool then calculates the density in the area and illustrates it using a smoothed surface that does not necessarily have to conform to a particular polygon (unlike choropleth maps) (Chainey, Thompson, & Uhlig, 2008).

In order to measure density of a housing vacancy in Homewood, I first determined a geographic radius that was relevant to the variable. I utilized a 500 foot radius because that is the approximate length of a block face; thus, the hotspots are meaningful and approximate density at the block level. The spatial analyst tool then divides the area of the map into pixels and draws a circle (with the 500 foot buffer I selected) around each pixel (Esri, 2008; 2012). The spatial analyst tool then drew a circular buffer around each vacant property centroid and fit a smoothed curve over the point. That is, each point (parcel centroid) is replaced by an image representing the density centered on the point; this smoothed surface is the average of the contributions from each kernel (James, Matthews, & Nix, 2004). The final kernel density map takes into account the overlap between each buffer in the area. When kernels overlap over a cell on the grid, GIS calculates the value for the cell by taking the sum of overlapping kernel values and dividing that by the area of the search radius (Esri, 2008; Garay et al., 2012) (Figure 5).

**Figure 5: Kernel Density Mapping Process**



### **3.6 STUDY 2: PARTICIPATORY PHOTO MAPPING**

Study 2 aimed to more fully understand how youth view features of the built environment in Homewood and to identify the features that they deemed most important. The methods for this study were adapted from Participatory Photo Mapping (PPM) as outlined by Dennis and colleagues (2009) and the Child Guides Methodology introduced by Loebach and Gilliland (2010). Both of these studies engaged young people in neighborhood walk-along tours, used photographic and spatial methods, and analyzed data in partnership with the youth participants. Study 2 utilized a locally relevant adaptation of PPM with a group of high school aged teenagers to photograph, map, and categorize community strengths and weaknesses. The following section

will describe the study in detail beginning with a description of the sample and data sources for the study followed by a detailed description of the procedures and data analysis.

### **3.6.1 Sample Description**

I recruited study participants from Operation Better Block's Junior Green Corps program. The program serves up to twenty high school youth per year with one staff member and one to two interns<sup>3</sup>. The Junior Green Corps program recruits participants through key neighborhood stakeholders and outreach into the local high school. The primary supervisor of the Junior Green Corps is a long-time Homewood resident who also coaches the local youth football team. His relationships with young people in the community drive recruitment; many participants are recruited directly through his efforts. If participation wanes, the program offers a reward of \$20 to existing Junior Green Corps members who recruit friends to join the program. The participants represent a broad cross-section of Homewood's youth. Some youth are high performing students bound for college while others are teetering on the bring of juvenile detention and are recruited as an effort to "keep them off the streets." This sample allowed me to see how youth from different backgrounds engaged with Homewood's environment.

I worked with Operation Better Block program staff to recruit participants for this research study. All twelve youth enrolled in the program at the time were eligible to participate, and ten agreed to participate. We obtained both parental consent and youth assent before the

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<sup>3</sup> Enrollment in the program fluctuates. At the time the study took place, twelve youth were enrolled in the program.

start of the study. The group consisted of seven females and three males all of whom identified as African American and were between the ages of 14 and 17. Five were current Homewood residents; the other five were former Homewood residents who attended school and daily programs in Homewood.

### **3.6.2 Procedures**

In late 2011, the research team coordinated an 8-week PPM project. In the first two sessions, I described the research project and goals, introduced youth to basic map reading and orientation, and trained participants on ethics and safety related to photography. I continuously reinforced ethical concepts and encouraged participants to pay attention to safety throughout each session. The JGC program staff and I then led the participants in an exploratory exercise in the community to practice the techniques outlined in the session including use of the cameras (inexpensive digital point and shoot cameras), ethical and safety considerations, and map orientation. During this session, the study team was available to aid the participants in using the camera, photographing appropriate images, and obtaining consent from people they wished to photograph.

Between the second and third session, I met individually and in small groups with participants and asked them to design a tour of the neighborhood that would show the most important places from their own point of view. They were given few instructions beyond this task so as to encourage them to reflect on what they felt was important about the neighborhood, rather than focus on what they thought the researchers wanted to see. I produced paper maps depicting the locations described by each participant.



The third and fourth sessions consisted of youth-led neighborhood tours and lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Each youth participated in two tours; the tour that he or she designed and led and a tour in which he or she accompanied another youth. I was present for each of these tours. During the neighborhood tour, participants highlighted their favorite and least favorite places and carried digital cameras to document places or themes of interest along the tour route. They were also given a printed neighborhood map on which they (with assistance from the researcher if necessary) marked their routes and the locations of their photographs (see figure 6).

**Figure 6. Participants taking photos and drawing maps**



Participants worked together to interpret and draw the route, frequently helping and guiding each other. I engaged in conversation with participants about why each place and path had significance to gain qualitative insight during the tours and jotted down comments the participants made directly to me and to each other.

The next three sessions were focused on iterative data analysis to interpret and contextualize the main themes identified during their tours (described in the data analysis section below). During the eighth and final session, youth presented the final analysis including maps,

spatial themes, qualitative themes, photos, and their own representations of the research findings. The audience included researchers, board members from community based non-profits, and other friends, family, professionals, and community members that the youth and the research team invited.

### **3.6.3 Data Analysis**

Two of the group sessions (the two immediately prior to the final presentation) were focused on iterative data analysis to interpret and contextualize the main themes identified during the tours. The first phase of the data analysis process was participant-led. These sessions were in a focus group format and lasted approximately 90 minutes each. During the first focus group, youth examined the photos they took during the neighborhood tours. I developed and brought copies of the photographs as well as digital versions on a shared laptop to use for discussion purposes. Participants sorted and categorized the photos using rubber bands and post-it notes to identify important themes. I captured these themes on a large flip chart and checked with the youth to ensure that I was representing them correctly. The participants chose to organize their photos and present them based on what represented the strengths and weaknesses of the neighborhood. This phase of the analysis was inspired by Photovoice methods; the participants selected, contextualized, and codified the photos that best represented key community issues (Wang & Burris, 1997).

Prior to the seventh session, I coded and mapped the routes of the youth-led tours using Esri ArcGIS 10.0 software. Each photograph was geolocated and the photograph and associated youth-generated codes were hyperlinked to the map. I also linked my field notes so that they

could be simultaneously examined along with the youth narratives and photographs. This allowed me to use youth-generated codes in tandem with my own codes, which I presented to the participants to check for accuracy<sup>4</sup>. The introduction of the spatial analysis component during this session led to a discussion of both positive and negative aspects of the built environment that involved both concrete (e.g., vacant properties) and abstract (e.g., the impact of vacant properties on drug sales and neighborhood stigma) themes. After this discussion, the youth completed and approved the final results and planned the format for their final session. They chose how they would present their findings and I provided them with posterboard, art supplies, and a laptop. Several students created posters and picture collages to present their findings while others preferred PowerPoint presentations.

### **3.7 STUDY 3: IN DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

Study 3 consisted of a series of one-on-one semi-structured in-depth interviews with young people. The purpose of the semi-structured interviews was to more fully understand the problems that the ten youth in Study 2 identified; specifically to elucidate their perceptions of the meaning and implications of vacant property and housing abandonment in Homewood.

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<sup>4</sup> Three participants (Breona, Lashawn, and Kadijah) were particularly insightful and took leadership roles in the process. I re-interviewed each of them in Study 3.

### **3.7.1 Sample Description**

I recruited participants with the assistance of key informants who I knew from my community-based work in Homewood. First, I approached a staff member from the Homewood Children's Village Bridge to College program and he gave me the opportunity to briefly present my work to students in the program. After the presentation, four students participated in interviews. My second key informant was a staff member with the Junior Green Corps program. He assisted me in recruiting seventeen participants. In total, I completed twenty-one interviews. All participants identified as African American and all were either current or former Homewood residents.

**Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants in Studies 2 and 3**

| <b>Study 2</b>              | <b>Participants</b>                       | <b>Gender</b>      |                  | <b>Age</b> | <b>Residency</b>    |                    |
|-----------------------------|---|--------------------|------------------|------------|---------------------|--------------------|
| Participatory Photo Mapping | 2011 Summer/Fall JGC Program Participants | <u>Female</u><br>7 | <u>Male</u><br>3 | 14-16      | <u>Current</u><br>5 | <u>Former</u><br>5 |
|                             | TOTAL: 10 Participants                    |                    |                  |            |                     |                    |

| <b>Study 3</b>      | <b>Participants</b>                  | <b>Gender</b>      |                  | <b>Age</b> | <b>Residency</b>     |                    |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|------------|----------------------|--------------------|
| In depth Interviews | 2013 Bridge to College Program       | <u>Female</u><br>3 | <u>Male</u><br>1 | 17-19      | <u>Current</u><br>2  | <u>Former</u><br>2 |
|                     | 2013 Summer JGC Program Participants | 11                 | 6                | 14-17      | <u>Current</u><br>11 | <u>Former</u><br>6 |
|                     | TOTAL: 21 Participants               | 14                 | 7                |            | 13                   | 8                  |

| <b>Participant Summary Study 2 &amp; 3</b> | <b>Participants</b>   | <b>Gender</b>       |                   | <b>Age</b>             | <b>Residency</b>     |                     |
|--|-----------------------|---------------------|-------------------|------------------------|----------------------|---------------------|
|  | 31 total participants | <u>Female</u><br>21 | <u>Male</u><br>10 | <u>Average</u><br>17.2 | <u>Current</u><br>18 | <u>Former</u><br>13 |

Those who were former Homewood residents are well connected to the Homewood community through attending school at Westinghouse High School and/or attending daily after school programming activities in the neighborhood. Table 2 illustrates participant demographics for both Study 2 and Study 3 (for a more detailed description of participants, see Appendix B).

### **3.7.2 Procedures**

I interviewed each participant using an in-depth semi-structured interview that ranged from 12 minutes to 55 minutes and but averaged approximately 30 minutes. The interviews consisted of broad questions about participants' perceptions of their neighborhood and then drilled down to questions specific to their experiences with vacant property, how they perceive and ascribe meaning to vacant properties, and how they feel vacant properties affect themselves and their community.

The interviews took place in several locations convenient to the participants. Most took place at the OBB office (which is where the JGC program takes place) but several took place in a private space at the library and one took place in a participant's home. Though I did not compensate youth for participation, the key informants I worked with emphasized the potential community benefit that the study might have and encouraged youth to see that as a form of compensation. I digitally recorded each interview using an iPhone 4 with the youths' assent and parents' consent and transcribed the recordings verbatim. I stored the recordings and transcriptions on a secure computer and removed identifying information from the transcripts.

### **3.7.3 Data Analysis**

Data analysis was an iterative, ongoing process that I began even before I entered the field and continued through the duration of this study. I used several steps to analyze the qualitative data for this study. My first step was to re-immense myself in the youth-defined themes identified in Study 2. I reviewed my fieldnotes as well as the youths' presentations and

photos, and began to develop insight into common threads that I could look for in the in-depth interviews. I then reduced the data through a multi-cycle coding process.

### **3.7.3.1 Coding**

Coding is a process used in qualitative data analysis that is designed to reduce large amounts of data to small, meaningful labels and to make connections between various concepts. Though qualitative researchers in different camps go about the coding process in different ways, researchers agree that a code is generally a “word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence capturing and/or evocative attribute of a portion of language-based or visual data” (Saldana, 2012, p. 3). Coding and code development are an iterative, multiple cycle process that involves constantly going back to the literature and comparing your emerging findings to existing theory.

I began the analysis by immersing myself in the transcripts. I listened to and transcribed each transcript and began the first iteration of my codebook during the transcription by identifying some emergent patterns and key words through in vivo coding. In vivo codes typically use the participants’ own words to capture the phenomenon being described (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, a major in vivo code created in this preliminary idea gathering phase was “trap house,” the term most of the youth use to describe an abandoned house that is used for hanging out and drug activity. Next, I read through all of the transcripts again and continued to jot down possible thematic codes in my research journal. During the third read through, I began first cycle coding, or open coding, to explore the data and began creating codes (Charmaz, 2006; Saldana, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I used ATLAS.ti 7.0 software to manage my codes and memos and to create a codebook. Creating the codebook was an iterative

process. I began by loosely defining codes as I created them and began to refine and edit them during the second cycle coding process until a final codebook was created.

Second cycle coding, also known as axial coding, is a more focused coding process in which the researcher hones in on specific themes to reduce the data to represent the most essential trends (Saldana, 2011; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). After coming up with a set of working codes, I used the “code family” tool within ATLAS.ti to group the codes into larger categories. For example, I created the broad code family “stereotypes” to encompass the codes “rising above” and “living up to,” which allowed me to compare how the youth described different responses to stereotyping. I used constant comparative analysis to systematically search for similarities and differences across interviews and revisited the data to revise codes as I gained clearer insights (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Throughout the process, I revisited the literature to ensure that the coding was truly theory based and to limit my own biases from influencing the final codes. I also engaged in memo-writing to process my own thoughts about the codes as they emerged and developed. The memo writing process will be described in the next section.

### **3.7.3.2 Memo Writing**

In qualitative research, memo writing is the analytic companion to coding. Memos act as sort of an “audit trail” that shows how the researcher made sense of the data and outlines how analytic decisions were made to help establish reliability (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). Memos are also used as an informal outlet for the researcher to process personal feelings about the data, write about emerging concepts, and examine cases that stray from the norm. I used memos to take time to stop and think about codes as I used them. Glaser suggests that one of the most important rules of constant comparative analysis is to stop coding and record a memo on ideas



after several times using a code in order to, “tap the initial freshness of the analyst’s theoretical notions and to relieve the conflict in thought” (Glaser, 1965, pp., p. 440). This helps to convey credibility in the research process and shows that the researcher considered alternate theories.

### **3.7.3.3 Establishing Trustworthiness**

In quantitative research, the standards of trustworthiness are reliability and validity. Many qualitative researchers prefer the terms dependability and credibility which parallel the concepts of reliability and validity but more distinctly reflect the goals of qualitative inquiry (Glaser, 1965; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Guba & Lincoln, 1998). The following section describes how I went about conveying both credibility and dependability in this work.

In order to establish credibility, that is, ensure that my portrayal of the youths’ perceptions is accurate, I began this section by clarifying my positionality and the potential bias that I bring to the study as a function of my own experiences. In order to limit this bias, I engaged in substantial and prolonged involvement in the field in order to gain a more in depth, insider understanding of life in Homewood. Further, I explicitly sought multiple sources of information on the problem of property abandonment and young people’s perceptions of it so that I could triangulate these data sources to corroborate my conclusions. Finally, I engaged in both member checking and peer debriefing to test my ideas and determine the accuracy of my findings.

In order to establish dependability, which refers to my efforts to map out the procedures that I used to collect, analyze, and interpret the data, I followed two steps. First, I used my memos and codebook to provide an “audit trail” that tracked my analytic process. Second, I

asked two colleagues familiar with the Homewood community and adolescent development to code several interviews to check whether there was consistency between raters and reduce bias.

### **3.8 INTEGRATION OF THREE STUDIES**

This overall goal of this dissertation was to integrate the results of the aforementioned studies in order to triangulate and understand the problem of property abandonment through multiple lenses. Each rich source of data allows me to see property vacancy from different angles and, taken together, they allowed me to understand micro and macro level implications of property vacancy in communities like Homewood. The integrated analysis proceeded through a grounded visualization approach that will be described in detail below. The analysis was both iterative and exploratory. The approach forced me to approach the data from many different angles and to consider inconsistencies, patterns, and themes as they emerged.

#### **3.8.1 Grounded Visualization**

The broad goals of the study were phenomenological in nature; I ought to understand the lived experience of young people who live in a neighborhood with high levels of property vacancy and learn the meaning they ascribe to vacant properties. I aimed to spatially contextualize these experiences in order to provide a thick, rich description of the meaning of vacant properties as well as spatial contours of housing vacancy. Bearing this in mind, I used a grounded visualization approach to data analysis. Grounded visualization is an approach that

combines elements of grounded theory, a traditional qualitative analysis approach, with geovisualization, the visual representation and analysis of geographic data (Corbin & Strauss, 2007; Elwood, 2006; Knigge & Cope, 2006). The logic behind using this grounded visualization approach is that it combines the strengths and inductive nature of grounded theory and the utility of GIS to visualize and contextualize the lived experience, more specifically as described in an article that introduced the grounded visualization method,

Displaying quantitative spatial data in a variety of ways may reveal patterns, and statistical analyses may reveal correlations, but it is often the case that explanation (and thus theory building) is grounded in the experiences of real people living through specific conditions and they are in many ways the ‘experts’, even if their explanations seem to be at odds with other sources of data. (Knigge & Cope, 2006, p. 2028)

Integrating qualitative data into a spatial framework through GIS visualization has been called a “particularly promising” area of research with potential to act as a vehicle for translating interactive knowledge between scientists, policy makers, and laypeople (Knigge & Cope, 2006; Kwan & Knigge, 2011; Pavlovskaya, 2009). There are four main areas where grounded theory and visualization intersect, which will be described below to contextualize how I integrated the various forms of data in this study.

The four areas of intersection between grounded theory and geovisualization are that they are both exploratory, iterative and recursive, incorporate the particular and the general, and seek to accommodate multiple interpretations of a phenomenon (Knigge & Cope, 2006, 2009).

Grounded theory is particularly suited for exploratory questions that seek to understand the multiple realities and interpretations of a particular phenomenon or process from the perspective of those who experience it (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Similarly, geovisualization

allows for visual exploration at different scales, angles, and perspectives to provide for multiple interpretations and views of the same phenomenon (Knigge & Cope, 2006, 2009; Kwan & Knigge, 2011). In addition to being exploratory, both approaches are iterative and recursive in nature.

As I worked to model the core actions and processes related to the phenomenon, I engaged in a constant comparison method that involves multiple rounds of data collection, analysis, and interpretation in order to test emerging themes (Charmaz, 2006). Rather than engaging in traditional quantitative hypothesis testing, researchers using grounded theory and visualization engage in induction and reflection to find meaning in the data (Knigge & Cope, 2006). Further, the approaches both are attentive to both particular and more general aspects underlying the meaning participants ascribe to a phenomenon. Grounded theory builds models that incorporate both concrete and more abstract categories, meanings, and processes; visualization can be done at both a small, granular scale and through a “bird’s-eye view.” For example, a bird’s-eye view visualization of the city of Pittsburgh will reveal concentrations of property vacancy in certain neighborhoods. This view will not, however, reveal the vastly differing conditions of each vacant property (i.e., one may be a functioning community garden while another may be an overgrown haven for feral cats). The grounded visualization approach allows for an understanding of general (bird’s eye view) and particular (resident perception of neighborhood conditions) aspects of the research question. Finally, both approaches are attuned to the multiple versions of reality as constructed by different sources of data.

Grounded theory seeks to create theoretical models about processes, actions, and meanings based upon the lived experiences of participants. Visualization intersects with grounded theory in that it may allow the researcher to discover multiple versions of the same

reality; official, administrative data may not tell the same story as those who experience the condition in their everyday lives. Visualization can act as the ‘glue’ that brings together data that present administrative, large scale realities and smaller scale, lived realities (Knigge & Cope, 2009).

### **3.8.1.1 Grounded Visualization Procedures and Analysis**

I used this grounded visualization approach to integrate studies one through three. The following section will describe how I integrated the results of various studies and examined them through an iterative process of analysis, returning to the data, and re-analysis.

I began by integrating the youth-authored maps and photography from study 2 into the geodatabase created for study 1. I used the paper maps on which the young people had marked the locations of their photographs to transcribe the points onto the appropriate place on the map in ArcGIS (see figure 7). I ensured accuracy in this process in two ways. First, I looked at the youth-drawn point on the paper map and the associated photograph. Then, I transcribed the point to the ArcGIS map and used Google Street View to do a brief visual audit to make sure that the photo was properly located on the paper map and the GIS map. I hyperlinked each photo file to the point on the map so that within ArcGIS, one can click on the point on the map and the associated photograph pops up and overlays the map. Finally, I added the codes that the youth

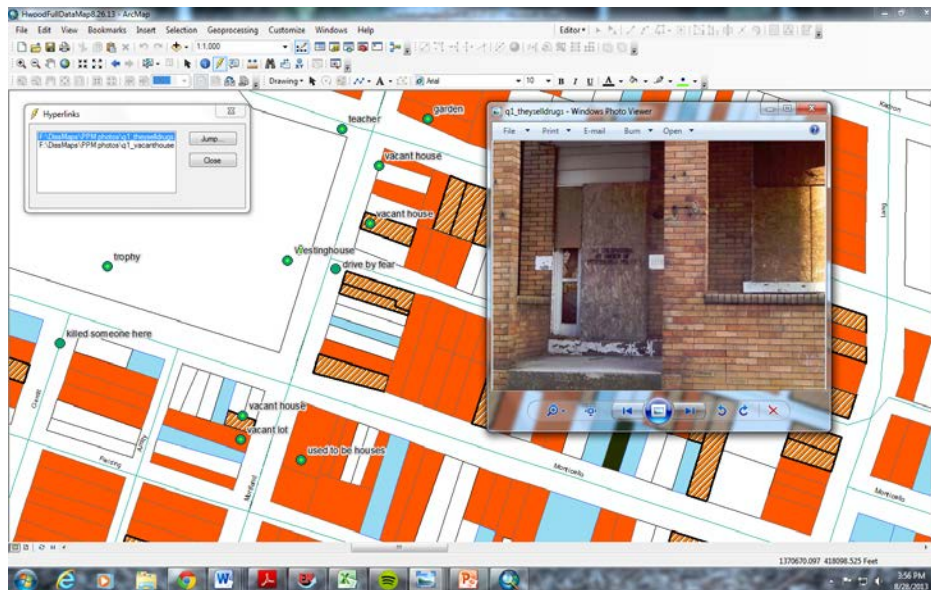
**Figure 7: Youth-Authorred Map (Study 2) Integrated into ArcGIS Map from Study 1**



assigned to the photographs and areas on the map. Figure 8 shows some of the codes and titles assigned to the photos. Throughout this process, I engaged in memo-writing to consider emerging themes and describe my perceptions of how the youths' reports supported and contrasted with the picture painted by the administrative data. I stepped away from these two sources of data with a number of questions that I integrated into the in-depth interviews conducted for Study 3.

I used the interviews to member-check some of my preliminary findings and to ask the youth more about specific themes that came out of the youth analysis in Study 2. This provided a richer understanding of emerging themes. After completing the in depth interviews and analyzing them, I used codes from the Study 3 codebook to add my own codes to the youth-authored photographs and maps from Study 2. The resultant map and geodatabase integrated results from all three studies. By clicking on a point on the map, one can view the photograph and a table that includes youth-authored codes, my own codes (from study 3) and quotes that relate to the particular image.

**Figure 8: ArcGIS Screenshot shows photo points, photograph, and table containing codes**



The product resulting from this integration was a multi-media, interactive map that I could use to iteratively explore administrative data alongside youth-authored data. This allowed me to better understand how young people experience vacant properties in their community because I could view general trends (patterns of vacancy) and place those within the context of young people's lived experiences (by viewing their photos and words within the database). I then further explored these realities through in depth interviews. The results allowed me to compare and contrast administrative realities with young people's lived experiences and present the data in a rich, visually compelling format. The iterative nature of spatial visualization and qualitative analysis dictated critical reflection at each stage and a non-linear, inductive approach to exploring youths' perceptions and the realities of the built environment in Homewood (Knigge & Cope, 2006; Kwan & Knigge, 2011).

## **4.0 RESULTS**

This chapter presents the results of an integrated analysis, guided by grounded visualization methods and framed in spatial context, of thirty youths' perceptions of the meaning and implications of abandoned property in Homewood. The objective of the analysis was to characterize and describe the perceptions of youth residents in a community with high levels of vacancy.

To explore this question and understand how the youths' interpretation of the meaning of vacant properties relates to existing theories, it is helpful to view their perspective through the lens of broken windows theory. The youth narratives reflect a common understanding of the meaning and implications of property vacancy that uses much of the same language as Wilson and Kelling do in their seminal *Atlantic Monthly* article. The youth proposed a lay theory largely matching the primary arguments of broken windows theory; though their focus revolved less explicitly around policing and more on the end result of vulnerability (Figure 9).



**Figure 9. Broken Windows Theory in the Homewood Context**



The following section presents results for each research question through various lenses, drawing on the results of all three studies. I begin with a description of the prevalence and condition of vacant housing in Homewood. These conditions, or unrepaired signs of incivility, frame the youths' neighborhood experiences that will be highlighted in this chapter. Following this section, I use this youth-authored broken windows theory as an outline to present the results.

#### **4.1 UNREPAIRED SIGNS OF INCIVILITY: THE EXTENT OF HOUSING VACANCY IN HOMEWOOD**

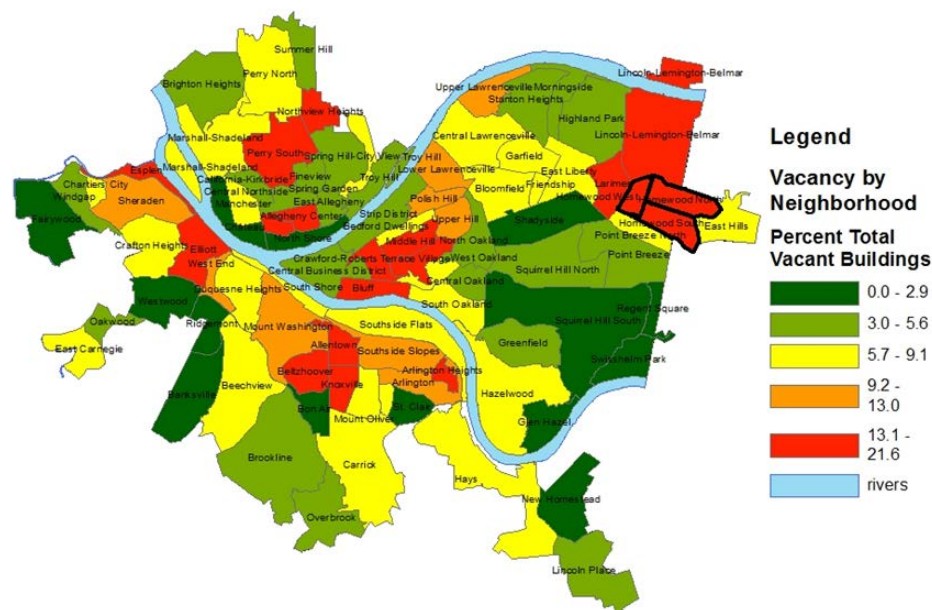
*"it's not pretty...like, it's a whole bunch of open lots, there's abandoned houses, there's abandoned buildings everywhere." -Kenya*

This section presents a description of the prevalence, extent, and condition of vacant properties in Homewood. These results are an important precursor to a discussion of the meaning

young people ascribe to property vacancy because they help describe the landscape in which Homewood's youth live and from which they draw the conclusions presented in this chapter.

Homewood is among the city's leaders in number of vacant properties. Figure 9 illustrates the percentage of all residential properties that have been identified by the US Postal Service as having been vacant for more than 30 days. The three neighborhoods whose borders have been highlighted in bold comprise the Homewood area (Homewood North, Homewood South, and Homewood West).

**Figure 10. Property Vacancy by Neighborhood**



The average percentage of vacant addresses in Pittsburgh is 7.9%, vacancy in Homewood North, South, and West are 17.9%, 15.4%, and 14.0% respectively. Homewood North ranks 3<sup>rd</sup> of all 90 city neighborhoods in percentage of vacant properties while Homewood South and Homewood West rank as 10<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> highest overall.

**Table 2. Neighborhoods Ranked by Vacant Property Prevalence**

| <i>Rank</i> | <i>Neighborhood</i>      | <i>Percent Vacant</i> |
|-------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1           | Beltzhoover              | 21.6                  |
| 2           | Esplen                   | 18.8                  |
| 3           | <b>Homewood North</b>    | <b>17.9</b>           |
| 4           | Middle Hill              | 17.4                  |
| 5           | Perry South              | 17.0                  |
| 6           | Knoxville                | 16.5                  |
| 7           | Northview Heights        | 16.3                  |
| 8           | Larimer                  | 15.8                  |
| 9           | Bluff                    | 15.5                  |
| 10          | <b>Homewood South</b>    | <b>15.4</b>           |
| 11          | Lincoln-Lemington-Belmar | 15.0                  |
| 12          | Allegheny West           | 14.8                  |
| 13          | Arlington Heights        | 14.7                  |
| 14          | <b>Homewood West</b>     | <b>14.0</b>           |

It should be noted, however, that among Homewood residents and most Pittsburgh residents, Homewood North, South, and West are thought of as a singular neighborhood. The weighted average percentage of property vacancy in Homewood as a whole is 16.4%, placing Homewood 7<sup>th</sup> overall in highest percentage of property vacancy. Zooming in to Homewood, Figure 11 illustrates that property vacancy is spread throughout the neighborhood, though there are some areas with particularly high concentrations of vacant buildings.

**Figure 11. Parcel Level Vacancy**



Figure 12 presents another view of Homewood and shows hotspots of property vacancy. The darkened portions or “hotspots” identify areas with high concentrations of parcels identified as vacant buildings. There are several distinct hotspots but the majority of the neighborhood registers some level of “heat” due to the high levels of vacancy. In addition to illustrating hotspots, Figure 12 includes the geolocations of youth photographs taken during the PPM exercise that include the code “blight” or “vacant property.”

**Figure 12. Density Map of Vacant Buildings**

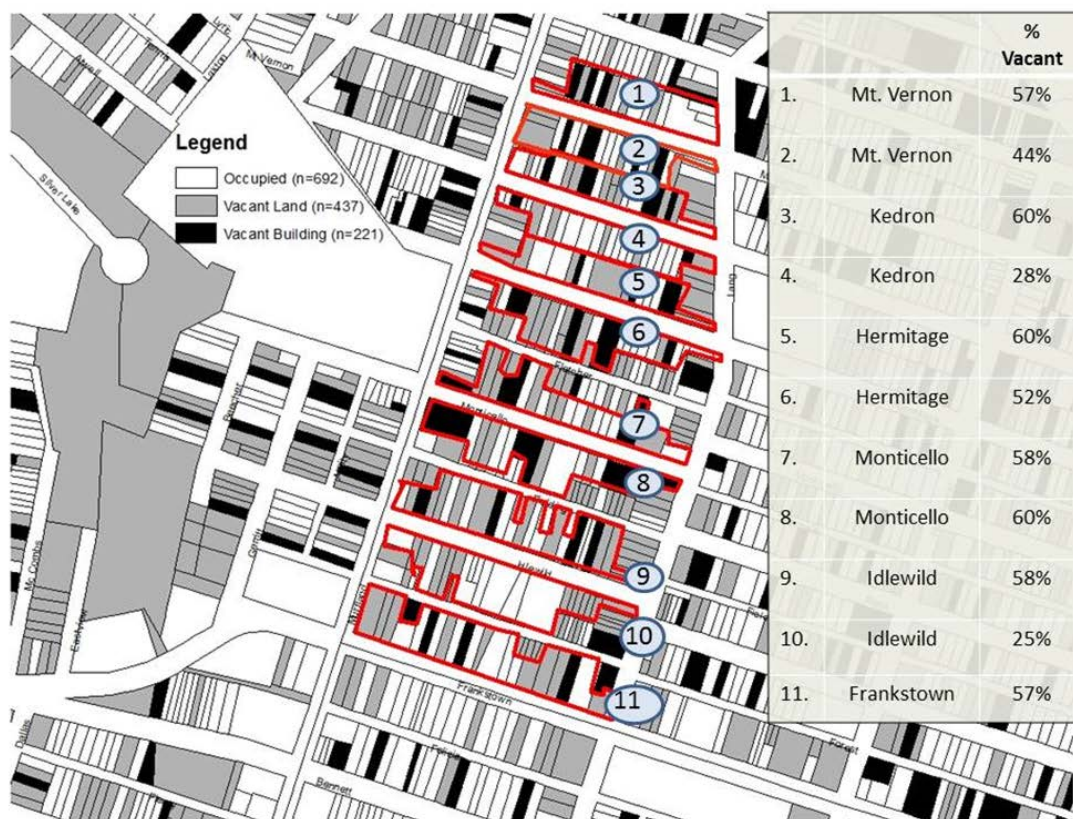


The area above denoted by the circle is located adjacent to Westinghouse High School. The map shows that the area is a hotspot of vacancy and that the youths' perceptions of those blocks are largely congruent with the administrative data. The youth also described the extent of housing vacancy during the in-depth interviews. When asked to describe the neighborhood, Tyrell explained, "uh, there's a lot of abandoned houses in Homewood. There's an abandoned house on like every street in Homewood. And that's um, that's hurtin' us." Tyrell's comments were reflective of the actual conditions in Homewood, perhaps even understating the prevalence of property vacancy. Figure 13 presents a micro-view of the 7000 block between North Murtland and North Lang Avenues. I calculated this granular viewpoint at the block-face level (the section



of the block on one side of the street) to approximate the viewpoint of a person walking down the street; it shows the stark reality of vacancy surrounding Westinghouse High School. In the words of Lashawn, property vacancy in Homewood is, “a very big problem. Like, that’s mainly what you see.”

**Figure 13. Block Analysis of Property Vacancy**

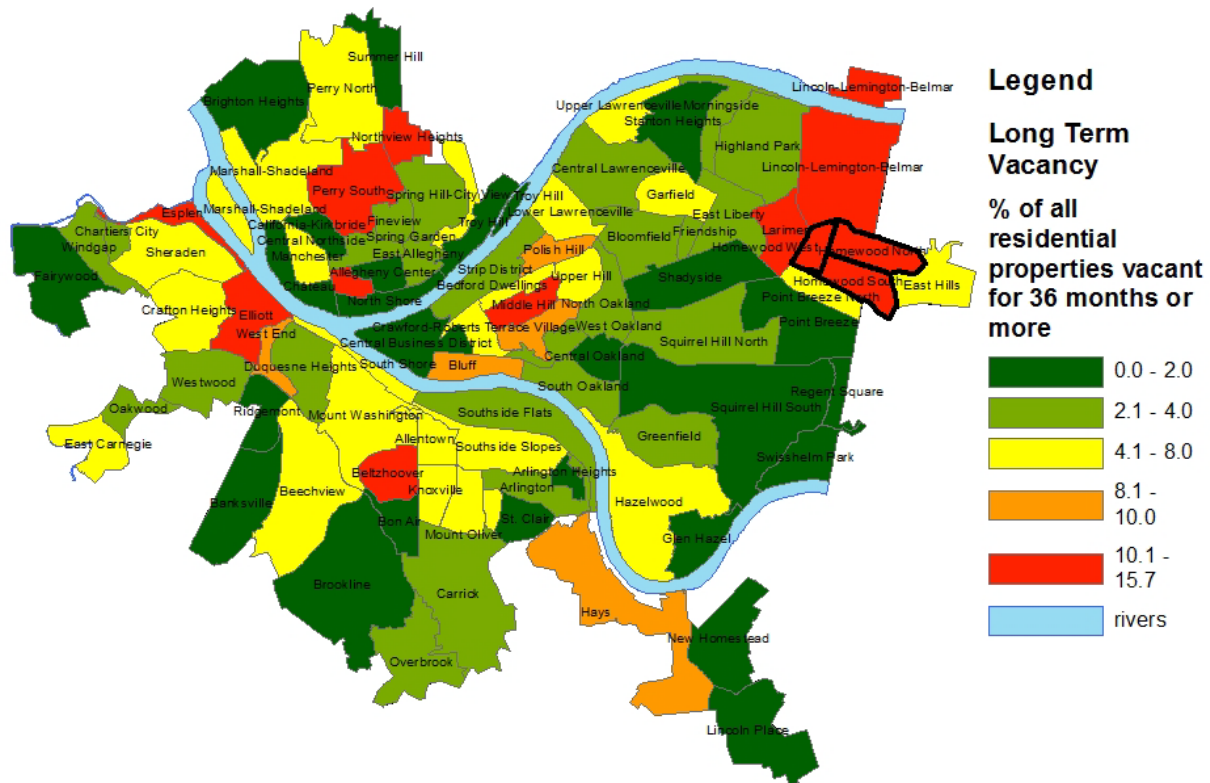


Another young woman, Kenya, further elaborated and suggested, “it’s not pretty...like, it’s a whole bunch of open lots, there’s abandoned houses, there’s abandoned buildings everywhere.” In addition to the prevalence of vacant properties, the young people in both the PPM exercise and the in depth interviews spoke frequently of the severely dilapidated condition of vacant properties in Homewood.

#### **4.1.1 Condition of Vacant Buildings in Homewood**

In this section, I will describe the physical condition of vacant properties in Homewood. Figure 14 illustrates the percentage of all residential properties identified by the US Postal Service as having been vacant for more than 36 months. The average percentage of long term neighborhood vacancy in Pittsburgh is 4.1%, vacancy in Homewood North, South, and West are 15.7%, 11.8%, and 11.5% respectively. Homewood North tops all 90 city neighborhoods with the highest percentage of long-term vacant properties while Homewood South and Homewood West rank as 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> highest overall. Taken together, the weighted average percentage of long-term vacancy in Homewood is 13.5% which would rank it 6<sup>th</sup> among city neighborhoods in long term vacancy. Long-term vacancy is an important consideration because it is a proxy for abandonment. When a property has been vacant for 36 months, it is likely that it has been both fiscally and physically abandoned and that long term lack of care has caused severe dilapidation. The youth photographed and described the conditions of vacant properties at length.

Figure 14. Map of Long Term Housing Vacancy in Pittsburgh



Dilapidation and poor property conditions were among the most popular themes of the in-depth interviews. Table 3 reports the condition-related sub-themes within abandoned property theme. The youth used strong, sensory descriptions to portray the conditions of vacant houses. For example, Breona describes the condition in relation to a popular television show that depicts severely dilapidated homes:

It's just trashy, there's nothin' there, like if you, there's like no doors on some of 'em, so if you just like look into the houses it's really [pause], have you ever seen *Hoarders*, the show? That's what it look like. And it's terrible. There's more abandoned houses than what there needs to be.

They used strong words suggesting disgust and frustration in their descriptions of houses that are spiraling into decay and contributing to neighborhood decline:

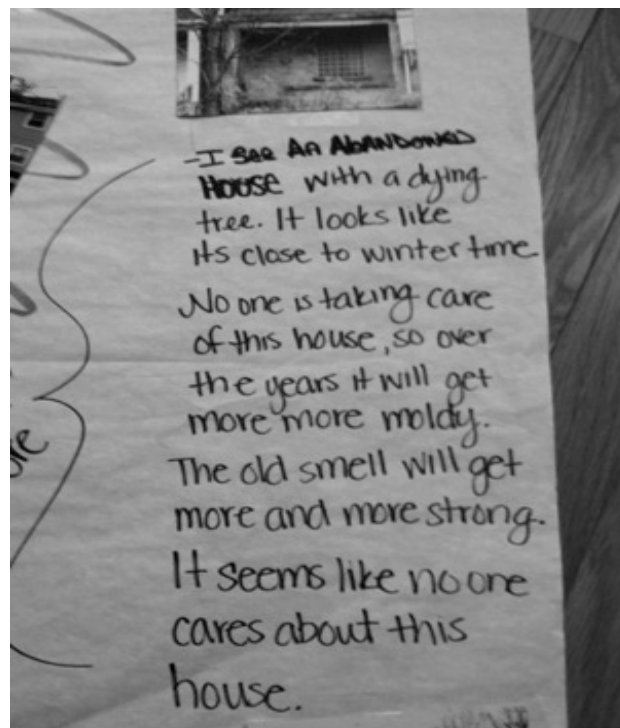
Like, some of 'em, pssh, terrible. Like, some of 'em just too out of hand. Like, the grass is growing almost to the window, the roof, or the porch...I'm sick of drive past and see it. So, I want them to do somethin' with it. -Isaiah



Others, like Aisha, described the sounds, smells, and tactile features of vacant properties, “The walls are fallin’ down, the floor creaks, there’s garbage all everywhere, it’s probly wet inside from whenever it rains. There’s debris and probably mold.” Similarly, in their presentation of the PPM findings, Rachel and Amanda presented the poster shown in Figure 15. They write:

I see An Abandoned House with a dying tree. It looks like its close to winter time. No one is taking care of this house, so over the years it will get more more moldy. The old smell will get more and more strong. It seems like no one cares about this house.

**Figure 15. Youth-Created Poster**



**Table 3. Vacant Property Condition Related Sub-Codes**

| <i>Vacant Property Conditions<br/>Sub-Codes</i> | <i>Frequency</i> | <i>Example</i>   |
|---|------------------|--|
| Looks bad                                       | 9                | "You know, you open up your eyes a little more and you see all these abandoned buildings, it takes away from the beauty of what Homewood could really look like." – Natalie  |
| Numerous  | 19               | "there's a whole bunch of 'em... and then people use them as trap houses, they trap in 'em." –Kenya  |
| Severely dilapidated                            | 18               | "They're like old. Like, they might be about to fall down in two or three years. Like nobody cared for them." –Aisha   |
| Smells  | 5                | "If you go in one that's been there for a long time, it stinks. And there's like animals, feces everywhere. Like just urine, like, it just looks filthy." Alex   |
| Trap house condition                            | 8                | "The house is just unsanitary like. Like, roaches and mice and stuff in there. Bathrooms don't work." - Brittany   |
| Trashy  | 26               | "People don't care about their property in the area so like you always see trash and stuff layin' around." –Amber  |
| Deserted/Dull                                   | 13               | "if Homewood like had all the houses that's down, all the vacant lots into somethin', it would just look like such a better neighborhood. It wouldn't look so dull and down and it would just look better." –Lashawn |

The appearance, sounds, and smells associated with property abandonment prevail in Homewood's landscape and lead youth to the conclusion that no one cares about Homewood.

## 4.2 UNREPAIRED SIGNS OF INCIVILITY SIGNAL THAT NO ONE CARES

*“They make me feel like Homewood’s not nothin’” -Kenya*

**Figure 16. Unrepaired signs of incivility signal that no one cares**



This section addresses Question 1: What meaning do young people ascribe to vacant properties in a community with high levels of vacancy? The overarching meaning of housing abandonment in Homewood is that no one cares. The theme ‘no one cares’ represents the youths’ descriptions of the feeling that no one in Homewood cares about themselves, each other, or the community at large and that blight and abandoned properties are a visual indicator of this attitude. According to participants, Homewood did not always look as it does today, and this is a reflection of the prevailing attitude of community members. Amber stated, “it wasn’t always like this, it, just people stopped caring...it didn’t look the way it does now. Like, it just looks like nobody cares.” Most youth placed the blame for Homewood’s physical condition on community members, including other youth. The following are youth descriptions of their peers’ roles in community decline:

It’s not, it’s not like Homewood is a dirty place, it’s just, it’s what people make it. Like, people, people nowadays they wouldn’t think to just find a trash can and throw the stuff. They walk down the street, they’re just gonna throw it on the street. So, Homewood is

only, Homewood only looks the way it looks because we make it that way...so, it's like people don't care anymore. They litter and they do anything. – Brittany

People just don't take care of their stuff no more. They just let stuff go. Everybody's tryin' to give up nowadays, nobody don't want to work hard. –Kenya

Most people be like, oh well, I don't care, so it's kinda like if you have abandoned buildings and stuff, I don't know it makes some people feel like there's nothing you can do for their community. – Amber

Others considered the role of both community residents and outside forces. Abandoned properties were seen as symbolic of the fact that city officials do not care about Homewood or those who live there. Isaiah described how he felt the city was systematically ignoring Homewood and focusing instead on other neighborhoods, “they don't care about Homewood. Like, the city don't care. But, if this was in Mt. Washington, that wouldn't even, that wouldn't even be here.” Youth typically spoke about government intervention in vague terms in both the PPM activity and the in depth interviews.

They recognized that *someone* in an administrative position should be doing something for the community but were unsure of who to hold responsible. For example, while photographing the area near Westinghouse High School, Lashawn and Kadijah (who both participated in in- depth interviews and the PPM activity) provided different answers about whose responsibility vacant houses were. Lashawn noted, “[these] boarded houses...they need to clean this up.” When asked who “they” were, she continued, “the community needs to take care of their own.” Kadijah, on the other hand, proposed a different opinion, “...this crib. It's abandoned and the windows is open. They should fix that.” When asked who she meant by “they” she explained, “I don't know, the people in charge of fixing houses.” Kadijah understood that there was some institutional responsibility for community well-being that went beyond that of community residents but could not put her finger on the responsible entity.

**Figure 17. Vacant houses near Westinghouse High School, by Lashawn and Kadijah**



Youth interpreted the lack of a response from government officials as yet another sign that no one cares about Homewood. Kaydence suggested, “well, they said our mayor is gonna come through and fix up Homewood, but I’m not sure.” Mya added that knowing that the government does not care about your community has a long term impact, “to know that they [the community] just have abandoned and vacant spots and that like, the government or nothin’ isn’t doing something to help to better their community...it probably brings down the community’s like, self-esteem as a whole.” The youth constantly questioned why vacant properties were allowed to exist in Homewood and consistently came back to the same answer: no one cares about Homewood.

One of the most frequent ways the youth expressed this frustration was in their descriptions of how abandoned properties were “taking up space” that “could be used” and not living up to their full potential, as exemplified by the descriptions below:

“I feel like, an abandoned building is probably kind of worse than just like a vacant lot. Cause like, you can actually look at an abandoned building and see that something good used to be there that’s no longer there. And probably, it’s probably worse, that you can just see that. And the vacant lot, there’s just nothin’ there.” –Mya

“Like, it has a great effect on your mood, you know? It just doesn’t make anything any better. You look around and see a lot of empty lots or spaces, you know what your community needs, like oh, we need more schools or we need more beauty, like plants and such. And it’s just these open spaces filled with nothin’” –Natalie

“it makes me think, like, well there could be something there. Someone can live there, like, there can be something in the vacant lot. Like, it doesn’t need to go to waste...there are so many that they could be put to use. They don’t just have to sit there.” –Imani

Some of their descriptions convey a sense of exasperation at the lack of response (or lack of apparent care) to property vacancy and unused community space:

I can actually walk around Homewood and see how many abandoned buildings and everything and it’s just like, wow...I just wonder like, why they’re not being, like, it doesn’t even look like, like the building itself could be renewed and made into a nice building but it’s like, why isn’t anybody doing anything with it? –Kaydence

Because, like, there’s a, like there can be something done with these abandoned buildings. There should be something done but they’re still standing there. They shouldn’t be there. Cause the space that is there could be used for something different or something useful. –Aaliya

“it’s just like, I don’t, I just be feelin’ like, why is this here? When it could be somethin’? It don’t always gotta be nothin’” –Lashawn

The codes “no one cares” (n=26), “abandoned: could be renewed” (n=34), and “don’t have any use” (n=35) were among the most common codes applied to the in depth interviews. The youth confirmed that blight in the neighborhood in the form of abandoned properties is a clear symbol that no one cares about the neighborhood. The symbol is universally recognizable by community residents and passersby as an indicator that no one, including residents or their elected officials, cares enough to address the problem.

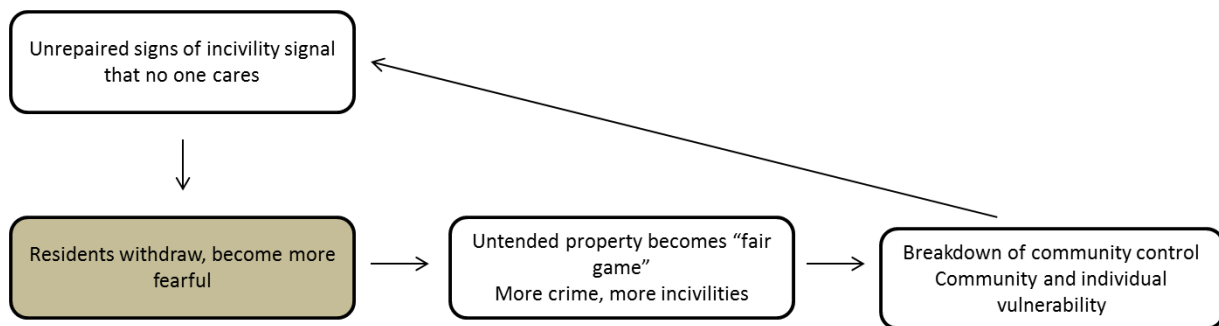
### 4.3 RESIDENTS WITHDRAW AND BECOME MORE FEARFUL

*“They’re not boarded up so it’s like the door be wide open. And I’m like, there’s rapists and there’s perverts and anything can just jump out and grab you and take you in that house.”*

*–Kadijah*

*“No one cares, so why should I care?” –Matthew*

**Figure 18. Residents withdraw, become more fearful**



This section begins to address Question 3: How do young people experience, characterize, and internalize vacant property related cues in their neighborhoods? Participants reported that vacant property related cues in Homewood create a sense of unease and fear of the unknown. The youth described being directly fearful of abandoned properties as well as fear that is indirectly related to abandoned properties. They reiterated the perception that no one cares and went on to describe how this sense that no one cares causes them to withdraw from public spaces and “watch their backs.”

#### 4.3.1 Fear of Abandoned Houses

In Homewood, abandoned houses are not actually abandoned. According to participants, abandoned houses are used for a number of purposes but most prominently as shelters for drug

users, as Kadijah stated, “people get into abandoned houses. Uh, they’re not closed down. Some crackheads go in there.” The youth do not fear the drug users, specifically, but describe a feeling of unease and unpredictability that comes with the knowledge that people and things are occupying *some* vacant houses. They use phrases like, “you never know” and “anything could happen” to describe this tension, as exemplified in the quotes below:

“I think sometimes it’s really not safe for the children, cause a child might want to go to an abandoned house one day. Never know what’s in there.” -Daniel

“When I was little, I wasn’t worried about abandoned houses. How I am now. But now that I know the stuff I do now, I’m older, and I understand stuff more so I’m like, I keep my distance away from abandoned houses cause anything could happen.” -Aisha

“it seems like there’s still things in there. You know. But, the doors, the windows are cracked. There’s still curtains in the windows. The, some of the doors are like, boarded up. And some people like go inside the abandoned houses. And there’s probably a lot of animals in there.” -Aaliya

These youth did not describe a specific thing to fear within vacant houses, but just a general feeling that *something* dangerous could be lurking. Many youth reported that they fear the unknown associated with abandoned houses. The youth describe a feeling of uncertainty; most have seen people going in and out of vacant houses with their own eyes but are unsure of who is in there and what their motives might be, “they scare me. I felt like, when, if I was walkin’ alone on the street, like, I would feel as though someone would come out of the abandoned house and see me. I don’t want to see nobody come out of it. Because they like scare me.” (Aaliya). At night, the houses take on a sinister appearance and youth described their fears of what the homes might be harboring under the cover of darkness:

“I think a lot of vacant places, they’re either boarded up or someone broke into ‘em, so it looks creepy at night...I think people might be in vacant buildings.” -Jade



“They [abandoned houses] scare me a little bit...like, at nighttime. Because it just looks like, it just, it doesn’t look right...I don’t like seeing houses like that. Cause I’m a punk. I don’t like scary stuff, period...I think I would wanna, especially if I’m walkin’ by myself, I’m there at nighttime and I’m walkin past an abandoned houses, I look at it and then I’ll think somebody’s lookin’ out the window or I’ll think somebody’s gonna jump out runnin’ and start, get me or somethin’. Some of the abandoned, like a lot of abandoned houses in Homewood, they’re not boarded up so it’s like the door be wide open. And I’m like, there’s rapists’ and there’s perverts and anything can just jump out and grab you and take you in that house.” – Kadijah

Kadijah touched on a common vacant property related fear-the fear that someone could use the vacant property as cover to “snatch” someone into a house or “jump” them. These fears were shared by young men and young women in the interviews and the photo mapping exercise. When I asked Brittany how she felt when she saw abandoned houses she replied, “not safe. Like, I could walk past an abandoned house and somebody snatches me up and takes me in and nobody would ever know.” The fear extends to vacant lots.

High weeds in vacant lots, like abandoned houses, can conceal people and animals. Some residents use vacant lots as a space to chain aggressive-looking dogs. During the PPM exercise, Eric photographed one such dog chained to the side of a vacant row house (see Figure 19).

Figure 19. Aggressive-looking Dog in Vacant Lot by Eric



Though the photo is blurry, it depicts an imposing dog peering out just moments before it began aggressively lunging toward us, causing me to jump into Eric who laughed because he knew the dog was chained. While walking by vacant properties, young people fear what they cannot see:

“vacant lots are different because like people get high in vacant lots and jump out and scare kids, rob people, stuff like that if it’s high enough. Like, the weeds get high enough...other stuff can be in vacant lots, not just in houses...like animals, can give you rabies –Isaiah (see Figure 20).

“Vacant lots do make things like, this grass we had cut on [street name] was very high, like real high. And I could say like, if a kid’s walkin’ past, middle of the night, somebody could jump out on a kid. But like, a abandoned house, you’re walkin’ past the house, somebody jump out on a kid. So any way, it’s still not safe.” -Daniel

Some of these fears might seem overblown, the stuff of urban legends; for example, Daniel told me, “like a year or two ago, uh, somebody, a kid went up in a house and found, uh, somebody had killed that kid when he was in a abandoned house.” Brittany told a similar story, short on details but highly sensational, “you know, in abandoned houses you can find dead bodies, like you can kill somebody and put ‘em in an abandoned house and nobody would ever know.”

Though these stories seem far fetched, the fact is, there have been several recent, local newspaper reports that detailed similar occurrences. This summer, the Pittsburgh Post Gazette

reported that Public Works crews implemented an emergency blitz on clearing vacant lots in the Homewood area because people had been using overgrown vacant lots as “ambush sites” prior to shootings (Navratil, 2013). Last fall, neighboring residents found a corpse on an abandoned property in Wilkinsburg, a community that borders Homewood (CBS Local, 2012). The youths’ fears seem to be grounded in reality.

**Figure 20. Overgrown vacant lot by Lamarr**



Broken windows theory suggests that blight cues residents and outsiders that no one cares for the neighborhood. These cues cause well-meaning residents to withdraw because they are scared, which further emboldens local offenders. In addition to one of the highest rates of long-term property vacancy, Homewood has one of the highest concentrations of arrests in the City of Pittsburgh (see figure 21).

Figure 21. Density of Arrests

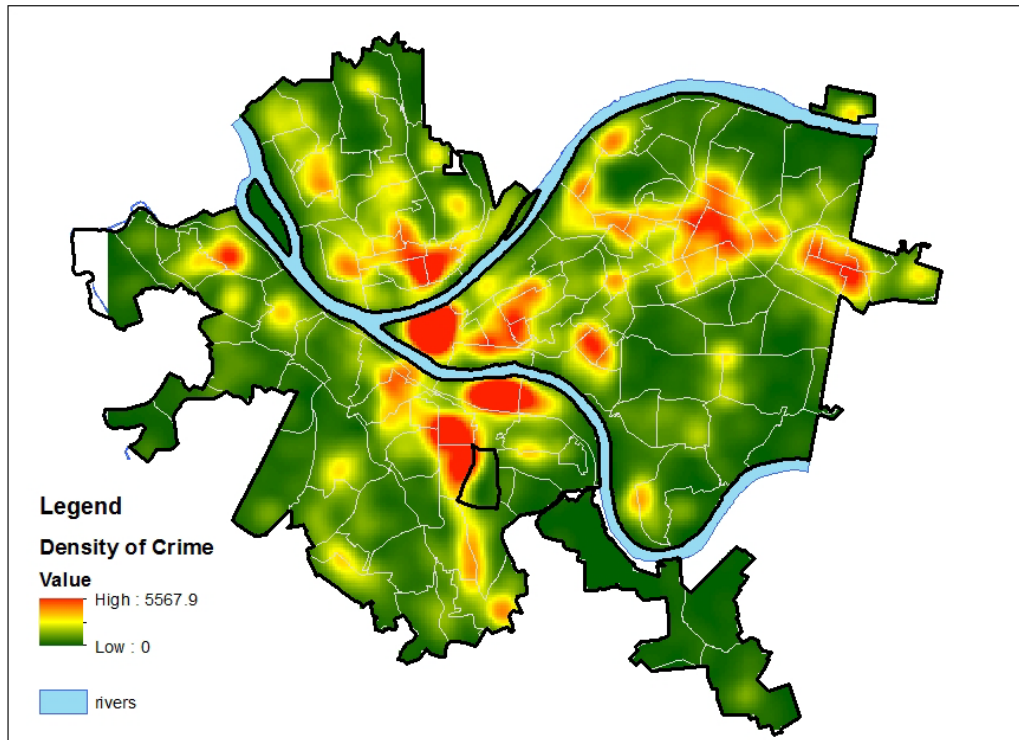
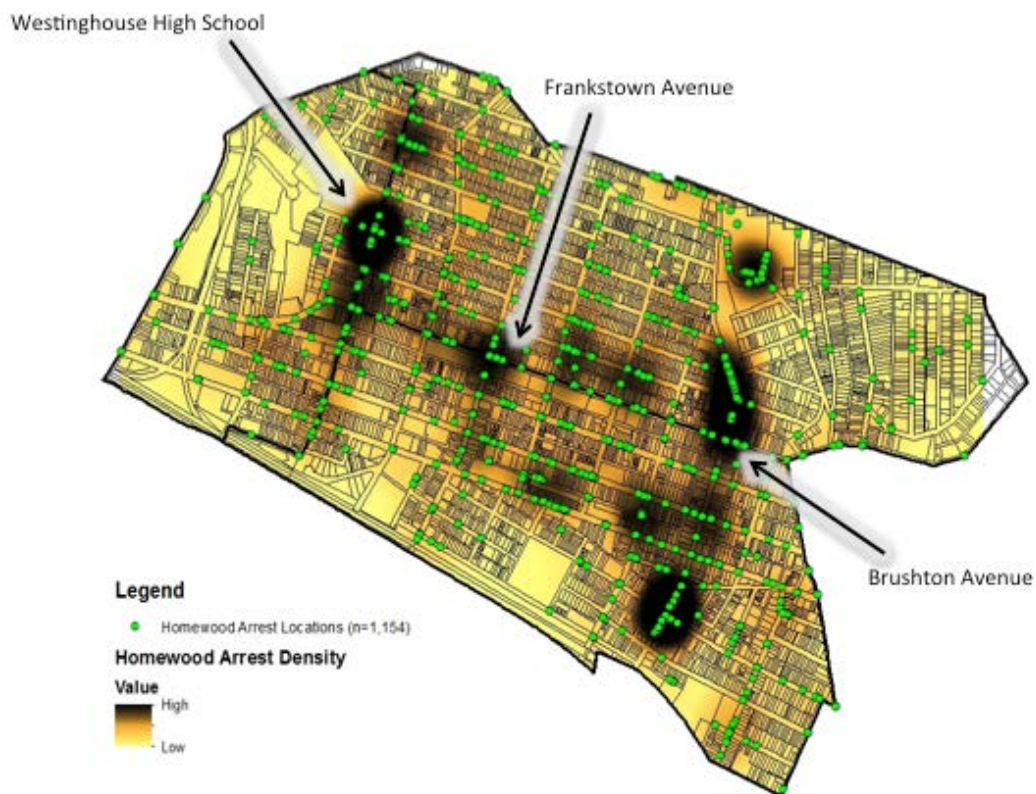


Figure 22 zooms in to Homewood and illustrates the density of arrests by block. Arrests concentrate around a few key hotspots. In the West side of the neighborhood, the arrests concentrate along the Murtland Avenue corridor which runs North to South, with a major hotspot located directly adjacent to Westinghouse High School. There are several high-density areas along the East to West Frankstown Avenue corridor leading to another set of hotspots that run along Brushton Avenue.

Figure 22. Homewood Arrest Density and Locations



During the PPM portion of the study, DeJuan brought me on a tour of Cora Street, adjacent to Brushton Avenue. He and his cousin, Eric, another participant and co-leader of the tour, deemed Brushton to be an unsafe place to bring me. While planning the tour, DeJuan stated, “we can’t bring Sam down Brushton, it’s hard there...it’s hard. You shouldn’t go down there. People be slingin’.” He used the term “slingin’” to refer to drug dealers who sell drugs in plain sight along Brushton Avenue. While on the tour of Cora Street, Eric told me that “Corr [Cora Street] is hard” but that if I really wanted to see “the hood” I should “go down Brushton after 9pm.” He and DeJuan described how prostitutes and drug dealers take over the block and told me about a history of gang wars that took place there while they were young children. In fact, we cut our tour of Cora Street short because DeJuan and Eric felt uncomfortable with some of the social cues they saw on the block. They asked me to get into the car and when I asked why

we had to leave, DeJuan asked, “you didn’t see them hotboxing that car?” Hotboxing is a term used to describe the act of smoking marijuana in a vehicle. He then added, “I don’t want them to think we’re takin’ pictures of them.” This high density of crime, coupled with visual cues of social and physical disorder, creates fear among young residents in Homewood, many of whom choose to withdraw and stay off the streets to avoid danger.

#### **4.3.2 Withdrawal**

In an environment pocked with signals that no one cares, crime goes unchecked. Residents withdraw because the physical and social environment are at best unappealing, at worst, dangerous. The participants who I interviewed describe a neighborhood that is “trashy” and “not pretty” and a social environment marred by random violence. Many youth reported directly that fear keeps them indoors. Nawtica talked about how there is nothing in Homewood (describing the neighborhood as dull and boring was a common sentiment) and the risk of going outdoors feels high:

“I don’t come outside. I don’t know, there’s nothing here. There’s nothing here for me in Homewood so there’s no reason for me to just walk around on these streets. So, I usually stay in the house...you just hear about it [violence] going on, or when people are getting jumped. I just think it’s best to avoid everything by staying in.” -Nawtica

They described a sense of chaos in the neighborhood that extends from the built environment to a chaotic, violent social environment. Mya described the community as having lost its innocence, “it’s like, the community has no innocence. It’s like, people are always dying, shooting and stuff. To just have the freedom to just go down the street and feel safe probably isn’t common.” They displayed a hypervigilant response to the context because, as several participants described, “you never know what can happen.” The environmental cues lead youth to feel a constant sense of

danger, as reported by Aisha, “It’s like, every time you go outside you’re gonna feel like somebody’s out to get you. You gotta constantly be watchin’ your back.” This leads to an overwhelming feeling that causes youth to seek safety indoors when possible, “it makes me not want to go anywhere, for real.” (Brittany).

Some youth would not explicitly admit to being fearful but expressed “fear by proxy.” These youth respondents typically used their mothers as proxies for their descriptions of fear and described how their mothers, particularly when they were young, imposed withdrawal by keeping them indoors. Almost all of the participants described how their mothers kept them indoors because of safety concerns when they were young. Kaydence’s description is reflective of most interviewees:

I was allowed in front of my house. I really couldn’t go places where, I’ve never lived in a safe part of Homewood, so it was always dangerous for me to leave. And then, I was so young, so my mom just had me stay in front of the house.

Thirteen respondents expressed that, if given the option, they would move to a different neighborhood due to their own safety concerns in Homewood. Another eight respondents specified that their mothers either had moved them to another neighborhood or school due to safety concerns or intended to move them to another neighborhood. Daniel described his mother’s worry, “my mom was thinking about moving somewhere else cause she just feels, if I keep goin’ down Homewood something might happen to me one day. She feels that if I move to Bloomfield or something, I might be more safer.” This goes beyond withdrawing children from the outdoors; it is withdrawal from the neighborhood. Mothers face a challenge as their children become older because they cannot simply keep them in front of the house. As teenagers become more mobile, they are exposed to more neighborhood environmental hazards. Kaydence casually

described how her mother asks her to come inside when someone in the neighborhood is shot and killed:

“I have a habit of like, I’ll go out and walk outside but I won’t have anywhere like, a certain destination. I’ll just be walkin’. But like, sometimes there’s shooting or stuff that like, will prohibit me from going so my mom will be like, it’s too dangerous outside right now so you should just stay in the house....most of the time I do hear the shooting, like the shots but I won’t know if somebody got hit or not. But like, she’ll like call me and check on me and tell me like, somebody just got killed so you need to come home.”

Many of the youth describe their mother’s fears with a sense of humor reflecting invincibility, for example, Breona described, while laughing, how much her mother worries about her:

I can’t tell my mom. If I tell my mom, hey I’ll be out in Homewood with my friends, I can’t say that. Cause then she’ll think I’m doin’ stuff like drugs or just havin’ sex. She doesn’t think Homewood’s a good place to be...she tells me every time I go out she gets worried until I come home...like, she thinks I’m gonna get shot or abducted [laughs].

According to participants, the mothers of Homewood worry that their children will be exposed to danger in the form of random crime but they also fear that their children will be socialized into the delinquent activities that are common in the neighborhood.

#### **4.3.3 Loss of control**

When no one cares about a neighborhood, positive residents withdraw from the public and begin to lose their sense of control over the community. Youth participants exhibited a sense of ambivalence over their lack of control over their surroundings. I commonly applied the in vivo code, “nobody’s ever gonna do nothin’” to youths’ responses to the question “how does seeing vacant properties make you feel?” because their responses suggested that since no one else would do anything about the problem, neither could they. For example, when I asked Nawtica how vacant properties made her feel, she stated, “regular. Can’t do nothin’ about it by myself.”



Based on the descriptions above, young people in Homewood have a lot of worries, fears, and anxieties to contend with. They reported that they feel someone should be dealing with neighborhood environmental issues and question what they can do in the absence of broader neighborhood support. They use this ambivalence as a coping mechanism to deal with the fear and uncertainty they have around community features:

“it’s just, I, like when I walk past an abandoned house I just, I feel a little creeped out ‘cause I don’t know what’s gonna happen. But then again, nah, I just think in my head like, there’s nothin’ I can really do. –Brittany

Taken together, the lack of control and ambivalence result in an often apathetic response to neighborhood environmental conditions. Youth see the properties and take note of them, but they seem to have made a conscious decision, with the purpose of self-protection, to join the rest of the neighborhood in “not caring.” Each youth reported that abandoned houses are prevalent in Homewood and that they had learned over the years that “no one cares” about Homewood.

Kadijah’s description of the intersection of these facts sums up that of her peers:

“it makes me feel like, nobody’s ever gonna do nothin’ about it so why should I worry about it? That house is just gonna sit there and there’s nothin’ I can do about it so, why should I even bother worryin’ about it?”

Vacant properties suggest that no one cares and leave youth with a lack of control over their environment. They are left with the attitude, no one cares so why should I? When youth stop caring about themselves and their neighborhood, they are prone to participate in delinquent and risky activities.

#### 4.4 UNTENDED PROPERTY BECOMES FAIR GAME

*“A trap house...it’s like, when people take an abandoned house and make it theirs and they basically do bad things in it.” –Aisha*

**Figure 23. Untended property becomes "fair game," More crime, more incivilities**



This section addresses Question 2, What do young people perceive as the effects of vacant properties on their own well-being and that of their community? The most frequently described effect of vacant properties on individual and community well-being is the ways in which vacant properties facilitate youth delinquency, crime, and community decline through their use as “trap houses” or “traps.” Although the youths’ personal definitions of trap house differed to some degree, there are several key elements including the use of a vacant house by young men as a sheltered place to hang out, hustle (sell drugs), and meet females. Youth participants also used “trap” and “trapping” as verbs to describe the activities that take place in trap houses. The term trap house does not appear to be Homewood specific; it is used by popular rap artists including Young Jeezy and Gucci Mane who brag about the utility of trap houses and the perks of hustling, for example, “money kinda short, but we can work it out, made a hundred thou’ in my trap house” (Mane, 2005). The following are some of the definitions given by the youth, largely matching up with the pop culture definition:

“A trap. Trap is basically something you do and it’s like, you basically hustle and make your own money whether it be legal or illegal. And the house is just used for that purpose.” –Kaydence

“A trap house is just like, if there’s like a group of young men, they will call their hang out spot a trap house...they just, have their guns and stuff. And keep their weed there, and bring girls to that spot.” –Mya

“A trap house is like, a place where they take their drugs and stuff, and keep their money in. Like, a backup house so if the cops ever try to come, they won’t find out everything’s in your real house.” –Daniel

“it’s like, when people take an abandoned house and make it theirs. And they basically do bad things in it. They’ll shoot up on it, they’ll get high in it, they’ll drank, they’ll party.” –Aisha

“What’s trappin’? Like, sellin’ drugs in them. Like, having sex with girls in ‘em.” –Kenya

“A trap house is [pause], somebody that sells drugs and that’s their little meet up spot. Like, that’s where they get the drugs delivered to, sell the drugs from, or make the drugs...like, some people have their own rooms in there, I guess. Girls, the nasty girls [makes air quotes], go there and do what they do with them. And, and, then like from the outside, sometimes the outside looks like, uh, a abandoned house but then in the inside it looks decent like.” Kadijah

“they’re uh, you sell drugs out of it or like you store your drugs. Or you hide, where you hide your guns and stuff. Or where you like sleep in.” –Brittany

**Figure 24. An abandoned house with "trap house" graffiti**



Youths' use of trap houses ranges from developmentally normative teenage activities like gathering with peers to riskier behaviors (experimentation with sex and drugs) and eventually to crime and delinquency through the drug trade. Traps provide a sheltered space, out of the public eye and away from parental supervision, to pursue these types of activities. The youth have already determined that no one cares about vacant houses so they become "fair game" for youth occupation, leading to further destruction of housing stock, physical deterioration, and crime.

In Homewood, vacant houses are so numerous that youth can take them over on a block by block basis, contributing to inter-group rivalry and violence. Kadijah described her boyfriend's use of a trap house for drug dealing and gang activity, specifically, she points to the tenuous relationship between older and younger drug dealers and the potential for violence:

I dated someone that was in a trap house and he was like, sellin' drugs and uh, always had the money, but always had the drugs and like...they go there, they play games and stuff and they just chill. That's their chill spot. Like, and if people try to, some people try to, some people shoot up trap houses if they're not in the same gang or whatever. Like, there's trap houses in every hood. Like, and then, in Homewood, uh, sometimes they shoot up the trap house...like, they don't let everyone know like, oh, this is the trap house

because then older people will probably, like older drug dealers will try to come down and mess with their, mess with their spot or whatever...like, if you're from Monticello, like, your trap house, that trap house is most likely gonna be on Monticello. Like, if you're from Race, that most likely your trap house is gonna be on Race...that's their power over other drug dealers, I got a trap house...like, they keep guns there, and just bad stuff.

Drugs and violence were among the most common sub-themes related to the broader discussion of trap houses. I coded 31 mentions of drugs and 33 mentions of violence associated with abandoned properties during the course of the in depth interviews. Trap houses are primarily used by youth for doing drugs (marijuana), making drugs, and selling drugs. The youth described these types of uses as a common phenomenon, "I mean, everybody does it now...if one of their friends is doing it they're like, bro, let's go in a trap house, let's do this." (Aisha). They related the use of trap houses with guns and violence, specifically, the use of guns and violence to protect stashes of drugs and money.

Sometimes, they used direct descriptions of violence like Kadijah did in the passage above. More often, they alluded to violence like Alex, when he stated, "you gotta be from the community [to get in a trap house], cause if you're not from the community and we go in there, there's a problem." Even more frequently, the youth described the general mentality or attitude of young men in Homewood in relation to the neighborhood drug trade, for example, Kenya stated, "the young dudes want to be thugs nowadays," which was a common sentiment among the youth interviewees. They used words like "thug", "hoodlum", and "gang banger" to describe other young people who were, in their eyes, living up to common stereotypes about violence in Homewood through their use of traps. Matthew described how the young men in the community embody stereotypical behaviors, "people put them [vacant houses] to use for the wrong reasons, like, they'll use 'em to sell drugs out of or stuff like that...there are a lot of abandoned

houses...it's more focused toward my age because it's like people who are older [are] introducing 'em to that type of lifestyle and they're basically supporting all the stereotypes and everything, and living up to that..." Drug sales out of abandoned buildings are so common that the young people looked at me in seeming disbelief when I asked them how they knew the problem existed.

During the PPM activity, Lamarr explained the process by which drugs are sold out of an abandoned home immediately adjacent to the high school, rolling his eyes at my naiveté, he stated, "they sell drugs there. Let me tell you how they do it. People stay in the backdoor and they sell drugs out of there," his eyes getting wider and his hands motioning back and forth, miming a drug transaction. He showed how the property was boarded from the front but walked around to show that the back door and windows were open to entry (Figure 25 shows the front of the house). He further described how this allows drug sales to go unencumbered with the relative safety of having only one way in and out of the property and an effective shield from eyes on the street.

Figure 25. Vacant house boarded from the front but not the back, facilitating drug activity



It seems that there is a lethal combination of an over-supply of vacant houses and demand for drugs that perpetuates the use of the houses as trap houses. The youth described a community mentality or attitude that drives youth toward delinquency and a culture of adults that either turn the other way or, worse, socialize young people into delinquent and criminal activities. After a time, houses used in this way by youth are either destroyed physically, or subjected to violence and abandoned by youth users.

The youth described how vacant houses go through a post-abandonment cycle that begins with minor destruction, like Isaiah described, “kids might walk past, bust the windows out of them, kick the doors in,” and continues with their occupancy as trap houses by youth. They are then damaged to the point at which they are abandoned by youth users and move into their final use by older drug abusers and animals before they are torn down by the city. Alex, a 17 year old male who recently moved back home to Homewood after placement in a youth detention center described himself as, “not the best of kids, but like, I changed a lot.” He illuminated the lifecycle

of a trap house in detail based on his own past experience. He defined the first step in the lifecycle as the point of abandonment:

Kids just find a place to get high, or when it's cold or somethin'. Cause we had a lot of 'em [trap houses]. Before I was in [placement], like, we had a lot. And there was nice ones, like water was on, heat on, bed in every room. We could sleep in there type. But it was just like, don't lay on the sheets cause like a lot of stuff be goin' on [laughs, makes sour face]. So you gotta sleep against the wall [laughs]...We used to find people that would just move out. And they'd like leave the couch or somethin'. We'll be like, oh, tv, couch, this is it! So, them ones be like the OK ones. But they still be messed up. Doors be off, you be like oh, that's why they moved. They messed it up."

He goes on to portray the cycle of deterioration and the impact of youth occupancy on the buildings:

Sometimes, if you go in one that's been there for a long time, it stinks. And, there's like animals, feces everywhere. Like, just urine, like it just looks filthy. Like, stuff ripped, like dirt everywhere. Like, it's triffin'. Like, you wouldn't even want to make that your little spot...animals go in 'em and stuff, like, humans are no longer in 'em. Like, they're just getting abandoned, they're getting so messed up and so dirty and filthy. Like, nobody goes in them and they're just makin' Homewood look filthy.

**Figure 26. Raccoon footprints on a vacant porch**



The youth described how these houses then attract older drug users who are looking for a sheltered place to get high and homeless residents who take up residence in vacant houses. Referring to them primarily as “crackheads” and “fiends”, nearly all youth interviewed and those who participated in the PPM activity described having first hand experience witnessing drug users going in and out of vacant homes. Kadijah stated, “some crackheads go in there, shoot



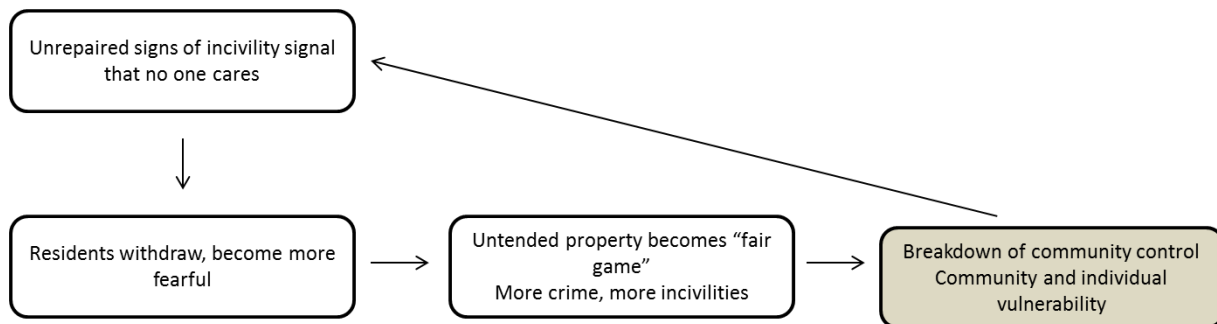
themselves up, I've seen it myself personally.” Two others elaborated that the drug abusers break in and stay in the vacant homes, leading to even further physical dilapidation and abandonment; “they’re used as, for crack houses. And people who don’t have homes sleep in ‘em, like for homeless people. They’re, uh, people tear ‘em down...there’s a lot of things with crackhouses.” She was not referring to the properties being demolished but being “torn down” or seriously damaged by drug users who occupy the space. Isaiah added that there is a lack of city government response to the properties despite their poor condition, “the drug abusers use the abandoned properties for their housing, to do their drugs. Some abandoned properties the city just lets go, and it just looks a mess.” And then the cycle continues when the properties become too dilapidated for human occupancy.

The cycle is self-perpetuating; the more vacant properties there are, the more easily youth will gain relatively consequence free access to them. Youth occupancy leads to physical deterioration and a contagion effect that leads to further deterioration across the block. Lashawn described her frustration by suggesting that fixing the vacant property problem, “[is] impossible because the more vacant houses, the more people’s gonna break and bust up houses, like they’re gonna just keep doin’ it until somebody tries to change it.” She continued by discussing how once properties are abandoned, they eventually are torn down, leaving a vacant lot, “People move out and I guess nobody does nothing with [the houses]. And then they just get terrorized and then windows get busted and then it gets knocked down and now it’s just a vacant lot with nothin’ there. A empty space on a street full of houses.” The lifecycle of a vacant house comes to an end with demolition, and it takes on a new life as a vacant lot.

## 4.5 BREAKDOWN OF COMMUNITY CONTROL-INDIVIDUAL AND COMMUNITY VULNERABILITY

*“I don’t know if you can even [deal with vacant buildings]. In this neighborhood, I don’t even know if you can actually deal with that. I mean, you can try to build something else but they’re probably just gonna mess it up.” –Matthew*

**Figure 27. Breakdown of community control; Community and individual vulnerability**



This section addresses aspects of Question 2: What do young people see as the effects of vacant properties on their own well-being and that of their community? And Question 3: How do young people experience, characterize, and internalize vacant property related cues in their neighborhoods? In the prior section, I described the process by which unrepaired incivilities lead to resident withdrawal. This is the beginning of weakened neighborhood social control; residents who might normally intervene in social disorder become too concerned about their own safety to exert control (J. Q. Wilson & Kelling, 1982). After this, some youth are drawn toward opportunities for delinquency because there is little perceived consequence for their actions. Other youth, like some of those in this study, withdraw further as community control breaks down. Wilson and Kelling (1982) proposed that the next step in this process is that serious, non-local offenders recognize opportunities to commit crimes and move in to commit violent, serious crimes in the weakened neighborhood. The youth in this study did not confirm this aspect of the

process. They proposed a different next step in which community control is further weakened resulting in stigma that contributes to individual and community vulnerability.

In both the PPM and the in depth interviews, youth described a sense that Homewood lacks community control and that vacant properties are one symbol of this breakdown of control. They described how this lack of control leaves them and their community vulnerable to stigma.

#### **4.5.1 Breakdown of Community Control**

Though concentrations of vacant properties in neighborhoods are, in part, a result of institutional disinvestment, the participants in this study described vacant properties as a symbol of the breakdown in community norms and values. The way that the youth described the neighborhood context when prompted, “tell me what Homewood looks like,” and “are there any stereotypes about Homewood?” was illuminating because they frequently incorporated a “dirty” or “trashy” appearance and the perception of potential for violence or other social disorder. Breona’s description of what she believes people who drive through Homewood experience exemplifies the connection between appearance and breakdown of control, “it’s dirty, that’s it. They just drive through and they’re like, it’s dirty and they’re scared...like, they could just be sitting at a red light and they’ll think somebody will just rob them just cause they felt like it.” Aisha confirmed her description, “It’s messy, ghetto people live here, you wouldn’t find too many friends here, you’ll get shot there, you’ll get robbed.” They both described an environment that is marked by a trashy appearance and the potential for unchecked violent crime. Several other respondents made the connection between how Homewood’s housing looks and outsiders’ perceptions of safety and social control.

Deandre and Kadijah both mentioned how abandoned houses, specifically, lend themselves to the perception that the neighborhood is not safe. Deandre stated, “People could maybe, probably look at Homewood differently. If they, if there wasn’t so much abandoned houses...they probably think, it’s not safe, dirty.” Kadijah indicated that abandoned properties contribute to neighborhood stigma and are, “probably one of the reasons why we have so many stereotypes. Because, whenever they ride past Homewood or ride through it, they see all the abandoned houses, they see the garbage, they see people outside, drug dealin’, and people runnin’, people fightin’.” The two make explicit the connection between abandoned houses and a lack of social order and control.

Tyrell took this description one step further to describe how abandoned houses are representative of stereotypes about Homewood and attitudes about Homewood because of their connection to social disorder and broken community norms:

“Across from the Y down the street there’s a abandoned home right across from it. I look at that abandoned home and I look at the Y right next to each other and it’s like, why is this abandoned house right there? What’s goin’ on?...First reaction would be like, wow. There’s a like, open house right there. And then people, some people sits on the house when it looks like that, so, probably, would I want to come back? Would I want to join that Y?...So, I mean, abandoned houses I think reflect off everything else we have in Homewood. So they’re about the same, the abandoned houses and everything we have in Homewood.”

This powerful quote describes the connection between housing abandonment and breakdown of control. Tyrell reflected on the fact that abandoned homes are so prevalent in Homewood that they surround community assets like the YMCA and attract people, who loiter without fear of community intervention. He then described abandoned houses as a visual metaphor for other social problems in Homewood. Breona also discussed how seeing these visual metaphors affects how outsiders view Homewood residents and creates a sense of apathy among youth residents:

“I mean, it puts an effect on how people see us. Like, it affects the youth...everything, just about everything influences everybody. So, if you walk around and you see an abandoned house, it’s going to just make you be like, oh, there’s no hope for this place. And we just help them drag it down even more.”

She alluded to the, “no one cares, so why should I care?” sentiment by suggesting that youth see the neighborhood as hopeless and thus, contribute to its decline. In her PPM presentation, she prepared two slides that showed how concerns with housing in Homewood relate to concerns about social disorder and breakdown of control. The first slide depicts a vacant home (bottom picture on the slide) and Breona’s own home located in the Hilltop public housing development (top picture on the slide) (Figure 28). She first described the prevalence of poor housing conditions and continued to describe how the homes are “falling apart on the outside weather [sic] someone lives there or not.” This suggests that people in Homewood are no longer enforcing community norms related to neighborhood appearance. She then discussed how these unkempt homes lead to a negative reputation.

**Figure 28. A Slide from Breona's Presentation**



Breona's next slide showed the breakdown of community values and the resultant disorderly activities and destruction of public spaces. She described how adults in the community "hang at the park doing things that aren't supposed to be done," leading to, "graffiti on the park and finding used things around the area you begin to worry a lot more." The two slides show how a community that lacks control spirals into physical and social decline. The breakdown of community control affects individual youth and the community as a whole.

**Figure 29. A Slide from Breona's Presentation**



Brittany and Kaydence described how the breakdown of social control leads youth, parents, and others in the community to feel as though they have no control over how people in the community behave:

"People try, but I mean if you can't, if people are not gonna listen to what you say, a lot of people feel as though, why waste my, why should I waste my time. Of tellin' them to like, to try to get them to stay of the streets if they're not gonna listen...it's just me wastin' my breath to people that aren't gonna listen, that's gonna do what they want. There's a lot of people who I know that want to stop people from doin' what they're doin', even parents, they want to stop their kids from doin' what they're doin'. But if they know their kids aren't gonna listen to them, then they're not going to say anything.

It's just like, especially, it's gotten worse. Like, we used to have a Kentucky Fried Chicken right across the street. Um, on Frankstown Avenue right across the street from the one stop shop. But then, that got closed down and they tried to open it up into something else but they had a fear of it like getting robbed. Because they feel like they're gonna open it and it's gonna be a waste of time because it's gonna get robbed or the building will get destroyed.

The youths' descriptions flow in line with broken windows theory. Wilson and Kelling (1982) suggested that when "broken windows" are left untended for a period of time, people lower their expectations of mutuality and shared obligations to keep order. These inhospitable places are inhospitable to residents as well as local law enforcement. Residents begin to lose trust that the police will intervene in their problems because when "no one cares" about the neighborhood, the police have little incentive to intervene. Brittany summed up the loss of control at all levels by stating, "Homewood has got so bad to the point where it's like the cops is even givin' up on Homewood."

#### **4.5.2 Individual and Community Vulnerability**

Youth responded to loss of control in different ways. Respondents' characterizations of how they internalize the community's loss of control fell into three categories, each of which will be detailed in the following sections. The first is an ambivalent response exemplified by the code, "I'm used to it." These youth said that the environment no longer bothers them because it is "all they know" or what they are accustomed to in Homewood. The second response, typified by the quote "It bring down the, like, community's self esteem as a whole," is used by youth who stated that abandoned properties are indicative of a community that has lost its dignity or esteem. The third common response is also reflective of neighborhood stigma but the stigma described by

these youth is racialized. The youth described racialized stigma and how it shapes how they believe outsiders view Homewood's problems, as problems specific to black people or, "basically like refer it on black people."

#### **4.5.2.1 Ambivalence: "I'm used to it"**

One response to the breakdown in community control was to display apathy or put up an apathetic front to cope with a lack of control. I applied the code, "I'm used to it," 18 times to indicate when youth claimed that they were not affected by neighborhood environmental features because they are "used to it." Alex described this common sentiment about abandoned properties when he stated, "like once you see it everyday, it's nothin', you're used to it." They told me about how they were not only used to seeing the abandoned properties in the neighborhood but had also become accustomed to the lack of community response to the dilapidated properties.

Honestly, when I see it I really won't pay any attention to it because I'm just so used to seeing it. So, it's like, if it probably got removed and made into something different then I would actually be surprised –Kaydence

However, despite this up front ambivalence, the youth also expressed discomfort, similar to that described by the code "no one cares, so why should I care?" about the fact that they and other community members were used to seeing vacant properties. Natalie explained her own discomfort like this:

"I think people have gotten too comfortable with it [vacant property]...it doesn't seem like anybody wants to do anything about it. It's like they are so used to seeing it, you know? People stop really paying attention to it. It just becomes a part of the neighborhood...I mean, I think it's a problem because you shouldn't have to be used to stuff like that, you know?"



Alex asserted throughout his interview that he did not feel emotional about blight, but his affect left me with the sense that he was expressing “emotion by proxy,” using others to describe his own feelings of sadness and fear. In the following example, Alex repeated several times that he does not feel emotion or sadness when he sees abandoned houses, but went on to tell a deeply emotional story:

“I don’t really got no emotions towards it. I just look at it like, mmm. Just rebuild it. I don’t feel no sadness or nothing. But that’s because I don’t know what happened. Like, where I live at, there was a house burned down and there was some kids, like, and we knew ‘em like. It was like, babies like. There was a fire, like and my little sister’s 7. When she drives past that, she don’t even like to drive past it. Like, cause they didn’t tear it down and you could see the fire marks, like the blackness outside. And my little sister started crying every time, like cause they were so young. And it’s [pause], they were so young. They were *so* young.”

**Figure 30. Burned home described by Alex**



In 2011, three children, aged 3, 6, and 7, and their mother, age 23 were killed in the blaze Alex spoke about; this interview took place in 2013 and the flame marks were still visible on the house. Although Alex assured me that he felt no emotion about the incident, his words and expression told me otherwise. The youth reported that they were used to seeing vacant properties but when pressed, described the ways in which they and their community internalize the stigma of living in a blighted, dangerous environment.

#### 4.5.2.2 Neighborhood Stigma: “It brings down the community’s like, self esteem as a whole”

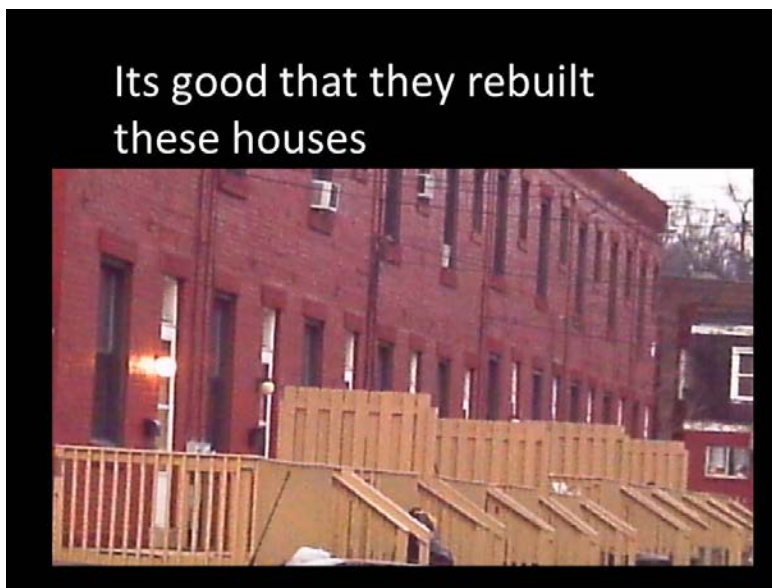
The youth who described abandoned properties as contributors to neighborhood stigma used words like dignity, esteem, and respect to explain how they think abandoned properties make the neighborhood and, in effect, the individuals in the neighborhood, look in other peoples’ eyes.

The following are examples of statements that reflect the attitude that the community has lost its sense of dignity and respect:

“uh, abandoned houses, they’re really not that much of a problem but to me, I would say if we got rid of ‘em, if it’s new houses there, we’ll make Homewood look much cleaner and dignify itself” -Daniel

“When you see that you’re livin’ in a like low down place, you’re not gonna respect the area as much and everything.” –Jade

**Figure 31. Positive Things in Homewood by Dejuan**



“I mean, there’s a lot but it’s not what I like to see. Like, I would like to see it fixed up and people using them but instead, it’s just abandoned. And it’s just, it doesn’t make us look good at all.” –Breona

Evidence from the PPM project also illuminated this attitude.

Some youth placed their focus on positive community aspects

because they were aware of and wanted to combat the existing

stigma about Homewood. Dejuan, for example, determined that his entire tour would focus on

Homewood's assets because, in his words, "everyone already knows what's bad in Homewood." His presentation, entitled, "Positive Things in Homewood," consisted of photographs that showed examples of positive institutional assets and attractive spaces (see Figure 31). Rachel and Amanda also struggled with how to show the neighborhood features that they wanted to see improved without suggesting that they themselves were part of the problem in Homewood. When I asked Rachel, "what's the first word that comes to mind when you think about Homewood?" she replied quickly, "ghetto." And then, just as quickly, "I think ghetto but I also think love...if you think about it, it's actually not a bad place." She and Amanda took several photos that reflected this internal struggle. The first shows a row of boarded up houses that Amanda told me once housed her aunt. They took this photo and said that the apartments were supposed to have been torn down "years ago." The second, a bright purple building, was an artistic shot that was not meant to depict the building itself but, according to Amanda, to show that, "Homewood still has color." She used the idea of color to represent positive aspects of the community, often missed by non-residents.

**Figure 32. Two divergent pictures by Amanda**



The youth stressed that the neighborhood, although it may look undignified at first glance, “is not that bad” or, not as bad as they think outsiders perceive it. Kaydence suggested, “if you look at it from everybody else’s perspective instead of people that live here, it would be considered a bad neighborhood. But, it’s really not bad.” They struggled to differentiate themselves from the neighborhood’s “low-down” appearance by suggesting that the stereotypes were overblown:

“I know there’s like crime and all that, but it’s not something like, I’m gonna walk down the street and get beat up or shot or somethin’ like that. Yeah, I guess, like, there’s good people in Homewood. We’re not what everybody thinks” –Jade

“I mean, it’s regular. People sometimes make it to be somethin’ that it’s really not. Homewood’s not the bad place that everybody make it seem like. The sad things that happen here is happenin’ everywhere.” -Lashawn

Matthew’s response, in particular, highlights the ambivalence with which youth described the neighborhood; often flip-flopping between suggesting the neighborhood was a good place and that it was a bad place.

“um, Homewood, Homewood. It’s not a bad place, I mean, it kinda is. It’s kinda not. It’s not the place that everybody would want to live but I mean, it’s, it’s. Once you get to know the people they’re not so bad.” -Matthew

Kaydence’s comments reflect a similar fluctuation, “Honestly, I would probably stay right now just for the simple fact that I am like, I’m proud to be from Homewood and live in Homewood. But at the same time, I really wouldn’t want to be here because it’s like, there’s nothing here for anybody.” These ambivalent descriptions in which youth seem to reflect on the dominant stereotypes about Homewood and integrate their own, conflicting experiences leave the youth and community vulnerable to negative influences.

#### **4.5.2.3 Racialized Neighborhood Stigma: “They basically like refer it on black people”**

In addition to reporting general concerns about neighborhood stigma, youth reflected on living in a predominantly black neighborhood. In particular, youth commented on racial aspects of Homewood’s stigma and how outsiders’ perceptions of the attitudes, behaviors, and mentality of African Americans was reflected back and confirmed by their observations of the built environment of Homewood. Daniel summed up the group sentiment best when he explained how he thinks abandoned houses are perceived by outsiders, “they basically like refer it on black people. Like, those black people are dirty, Homewood people are dirty. Like, they don’t take care of their neighborhood.” He and the other youth were closely attuned to negative stereotypes about black neighborhoods like Homewood

Youth used terms like “ghetto” and “ratchet,” with clear racial undertones pertaining to stereotypes about the behavior of lower income African Americans to describe how people from Homewood are perceived. The youths’ definitions of “ghetto” and “ratchet” were nearly identical, commonly described as, “loud, crazy, just always wantin’ to fight. Always bein’ rowdy and everything.” They connected a “dirty” environment, marked by blight and dilapidated abandoned housing, with these behavioral stereotypes. Kadijah, like many of the youth, talked about how stereotypes in Homewood are interconnected with the concept of “ratchet” behavior:

“it’s dirty. Uh, that there’s gunshots every day. They um, some people say you, if you’re from a different hood you go down there acting crazy you’re automatically gonna go get killed or beat up or somethin’. And a lot of people say it’s ratchet.”

In the PPM activity, I used a word association prompt to understand what youth thought of first when they heard the word Homewood. Of the 10 youth who participated in tours, 8 chose the words “ghetto” and “hood” with two others diverging and choosing the words “gunshots”

and “love.” Describing Homewood as the ghetto brings to mind images relevant to the physical and social environment as well as the racial composition of the neighborhood. When I spoke with Rachel and Breona about their concept of the word ghetto on our walking tour, Rachel explained, “we mean our type of ghetto, like slang.” Breona clarified, “the real ghetto is like a concentration camp and the holocaust.” Kaydence incorporated ghetto stereotypes when she described the physical and social features of her neighborhood. She began by describing how Homewood looks and continued to describe how that physical appearance contributed to negative outside perceptions:

“It looks like, it’s not, it’s not a, like nobody would want to live here if they really looked at it. Like, everybody thinks if you live in Homewood, like, they think that people who live in Homewood, we’re like ratchet and ghetto. They think you’re gonna be, like involved in all the wrong things. You’re never gonna make it out of Homewood. Um, basically there, everything negative is associated with Homewood...it’s only true because people are like, basically living based on what other people are saying. Like, they feel like just, oh they’re saying you can’t make it out of Homewood or Homewood’s a bad place, then they’ll make it that way.”

Kaydence’s response echoes another common sentiment among youth participants. Respondents seemed to struggle with their perception of outsiders stigmatizing Homewood because they described themselves as “above” or different from stigmatized aspects of the community. They described, like Kaydence, how other youth disappoint them by embodying the stereotypes they work so hard to overcome. Natalie, a 19 year old, looked at the neighborhood through more mature eyes and described how other youth not only embody the negative stereotypes, but seem to relish a delinquent or dangerous lifestyle:

“I think because I’m a young adult now, I see that this place isn’t OK....These kids, they pick up on their parents’ habits, they pick up on people’s habits that have been here so they have that type of mentality. Which is horrible. They feel like this is OK. Like, this is the best place to live, you know? They’re proud to say, you know, I’m from *Homewood* [emphasizes]. Not like it’s a bad thing, but, all the things that’s goin’ on, it’s nothing to be proud of.”

Participants in this study presented themselves as different from the stereotypes that they had internalized. Daniel seemed to want to convince me that he differed from the group norm, “stereotypes is that they all think we’re black, rude, and negative. Even though that stereotype is really wrong. Because, talking to myself personally, I’m actually a good person. Good grades, all that. See, I try to, I try to make somethin’ out of my life,” he stressed the word “actually” for emphasis. Natalie explained her thoughts similarly, “they say all black ghetto people live here. All the gang members live here...I mean, you will find a lot of black people here but they’re not all necessarily ghetto and gang members, you know?” The youth presented themselves as having high esteem and efficacy for working to “rise above” the common script for Homewood youth. However, they seemed to suffer and struggle with the idea of being categorized as a member of a group and a community held in low esteem by others:

“We just got stereotypes that Homewood is a terrible place to be but it’s not, for real, for real. To me, where I be. It just, got all these, just about how-it’s the majority of Homewood is black people and people already think the mentality of black people are bad. Cause that’s all you hear about, and gang bangin’ and that’s, that’s it. Gang bangin’ and shooting and drinkin’ and doin’ drugs. And that’s all they think we’re about. Like, we’re not nice. That’s what they think. But we really are, we’re just, we just look it.”

Beyond the stigma attached to neighborhoods based on the state of the built environment, there are deeper social stigmas related to race and class that interconnect to create a powerful neighborhood stigma that is internalized by young people.

#### **4.6 ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS: INTERRUPTING THE CYCLE AND 'FIXED WINDOWS THEORY'**

As part of my constant comparative analysis, it was important to consider alternate explanations that challenged the Homewood specific broken windows theory that the youth most clearly outlined. Though they focused primarily on the role of vacant properties and broken windows in community decline, the youth also consistently highlighted a more strengths based approach to understanding urban blight. Youth across the three studies stated that they retain hope that Homewood has potential despite the vulnerability, apathy, and hopelessness that they described in response to abandoned houses. Natalie told me that it took her some time to see beyond the more stigmatized aspects of Homewood but stated, “once you really become like active in the neighborhood and interact with the people it’s just like anywhere else. I think it’s one of those places like, if you really sit down and like and actually live there you realize how much potential the place actually has.”

“Fixed windows theory”, a proposition outlined in brief by Mitch Duneier (1999) in his ethnographic work, *Sidewalk*, could be used as a framework to interrupt the broken windows cycle described in this chapter. Rather than broken windows signaling that no one cares, fixed windows send the message that someone cares about the neighborhood. The youth in this study emphasized their own role as assets in the community and focused on the impact of the Junior Green Corp’s beautification efforts. This emphasis, fit within the fixed windows framework, presents an alternative, strengths based perspective that could be used to address the negative effects of property vacancy on communities and young people.



The youth reported that even small changes have an impact on their outlook. They took pride in their work and seemed to think it was an important first step in improving Homewood's image to outsiders and in promoting wellness in the community. For example, Daniel described his own efforts in improving the environment in Homewood, "we did just cut a few lots to make it look better. Got some few flowers, sunflower garden, to make Homewood, brighten the day up, make it look nicer.... this program I'm in, uh Operation Better Block, we are cutting grass to make Homewood look more distinct. We're makin' it look better." He described minor efforts in the neighborhood as steps in making the neighborhood look "more distinct" and to "brighten the day up" and described his own role in these efforts with pride. Other youth showed a desire to change the way people look at Homewood. For example, Amber reported that, through the JGC program, she wanted to, "show people that Homewood is a good community, just like everybody else is." The youths' descriptions point toward the potential in programs like the JGC to simultaneously promote youth development and community development.

Work like this could promote community healing by cleaning up and influencing the stigmatizing effect of the built environment while also providing youth development opportunities. The literature suggests that creating healthy places or "therapeutic landscapes" in places characterized by decline can mitigate place based stigma and promote individual and community health (Wakefield & McMullan, 2005). Many youth reported that they would like to take a leadership role in creating community change through environmental change efforts but they did not want to do it alone. Breona stated,

if I really wanted to help Homewood I would call people and be like, hey, come do this, come do that. I would really consider living here just to, just for the advantage of me being here, like, for everybody's good. To be the person, like what do we do here? What

do we do here? And I'll tell them. But, I would have to try to get everybody into it, like to contribute and help out.

Lashawn talked about how the Junior Green Corps' efforts were important, but not without follow through from the rest of the community. She expressed resentment that "just a couple of kids" were leading efforts in Homewood and seemed to think that a more communal approach would help to solidify their efforts:

Like, what we do when we go cut on them [vacant lots] and put the sunflowers in and get the lead out of it and stuff, I really think that's somethin' bigger that everybody should be tryin' to do. Not just a couple kids. We should bring, like the environment should be able to come together and do it.

Overall, in addition to the Homewood specific broken windows theory, the youth proposed a fixed windows approach in which they were the catalysts and leaders for environmental change in Homewood, with the support of adults in the community and in the city. They repeatedly suggested that "people start coming together." This approach, though different in name, seems to suggest the role of youth in promoting collective efficacy and social cohesion in the neighborhood as a way to mitigate the negative effects of the property vacancy and blight. These types of efforts help to remove the negative stigma on youth in the community and the community environment. Aaliya summed up what many of the youth reported about the impact of community beautification and the Junior Green Corps program:

Um, yes I think Operation Better Block is [having an impact]. Like, how we beautify the community. Yeah, and we try our best...I think like some people care more than others but we, we try to make it look better than what it is and seem better than what it is. Because we don't anybody thinking like thinkin, like, like it uh, it, I can say it is a bad

community but like we don't want anybody to think that, we want them to see it in our eyes.

She speaks of removing community stigma and showing the positive contributions of young people to the community. Fixing broken windows is one way to highlight these strengths because, like DeJuan stated during the photo mapping exercise, "everyone already knows what's bad about Homewood."

## **5.0 CONCLUSION**

This study aimed to understand the meaning young people ascribe to abandoned properties, how they interpret vacant property related cues, and finally what impact young people believe property vacancy has on themselves and their community. What do abandoned properties mean? They mean that no one cares. This has broad implications for how young people interpret and internalize abandoned properties and related cues. Participants in this study connected property abandonment to their own experiences in the community and their reactions included internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Youth reported that vacant properties facilitate delinquency and play a role in the complex web of community decline in Homewood. Despite these concerns, the youth participants also conveyed that there is hope for the community and that hope may rest in the hands of youth, who, though at times apathetic or ambivalent, have the power to make meaningful changes through small efforts like community beatification. Homewood is a stigmatized community and these interconnected stigmas related to class, race, and age seem to affect Homewood's young people in profound ways.

## **5.1 SUMMARY OF FINDINGS**

The youth in this study described a process through which abandoned properties exert their impact on individual youth and on the community at large. This multi-step process includes: 1) unrepaired signs of incivility signal that no one cares; 2) residents withdraw, become more

fearful; 3) untended property becomes “fair game” leading to more crime, more incivilities; and finally a 4) breakdown of community control, community and individual vulnerability.

### **5.1.1 Unrepaired signs of incivility signal that no one cares**

Homewood is among the most physically and socially distressed neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. The extreme prevalence of vacancy and extent of disrepair sent a clear message to the youth participants in this study and communicated that no one cares about Homewood or the residents of Homewood. The youths’ perceptions reflect the administrative reality; Homewood’s physical environment is extraordinarily dilapidated. This dilapidation manifests in a multisensory experience where the smells, sounds, and sight of abandonment reinforce the notion that no one cares about Homewood. This mirrors Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) conceptualization of the first step in broken windows theory and is corroborated by existing research that suggests that features in the built environment that signal that no one cares influence people’s behaviors and perceptions (D. A. Cohen, Farley, & Mason, 2003; D. A. Cohen, Mason, et al., 2003; D. A. Cohen et al., 2000). Living in an environment marked by blight and physical deterioration has been associated with withdrawal, anxiety, fear, and depression (Curry et al., 2008; Galea, Ahern, Rudenstine, Wallace, & Vlahov, 2005; Latkin & Curry, 2003; Latkin, German, Hua, & Curry, 2009; Mair, Roux, & Galea, 2008; Perkins & Taylor, 1996; Catherine E. Ross & Jang, 2000; Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). Most researchers combine various negative environmental features (e.g.; graffiti, litter, abandoned vehicles) with abandoned houses when they measure neighborhood blight but the youth in this study reported that abandoned properties, specifically, contribute to feelings of fear and withdrawal.

### **5.1.2 Residents withdraw and become more fearful**

The youth interpret abandoned buildings as cues that no one cares and are left with the sense that if no one cares about Homewood, then no one is looking out for their best interest and safety. They used a variety of coping mechanisms to deal with their unease. As youth started to feel a loss of control, they described being fearful and withdrawing from the outdoor neighborhood environment either of their own volition or as a result of parent imposed rules. Some reported a sense of vulnerability in the face of frequent violence coupled with the density of vacancy; they were hypervigilant to potential threats in the built and social environment. Others maintained an ambivalent attitude because of their reported lack of control over the chaos. This ambivalent attitude led some youth to say, “no one cares, so why should I care?”

This step in the process also mirrors broken windows theory but rather than focus on the end result of crime, as is the norm in broken windows theory related literature, it is important to place emphasis on each step as each is an integral part of the process of understanding how vacant properties exert their effects on young people. Youth reported that vacant properties make them feel scared, withdraw from the streets, and feel a sense of vulnerability. Though fear of crime is an important component, the houses themselves are scary even in the absence of crime or related threats. Vacant houses contribute to these youths’ internalizing behaviors and contribute to externalizing behaviors through their facilitation of delinquent and criminal activities.

The youths’ descriptions rarely incorporated the role of law enforcement, one of the key components of existing theories. Based on my own observations and experiences in Homewood, I would posit that this is related to distrust or lack of law enforcement presence in the

neighborhood. Broken windows theory is often critiqued for blaming urban communities for social ills and resulting in overly draconian police action (Harcourt, 2001; Hinkle & Weisburd, 2008). These critiques are well grounded but this research suggests that, at least among this group of youth, the basic components of the theory match their experience with blight in Homewood. Skogan's (1990) later theoretical development of disorder and decline connected the intersection of crime, blight, and neighborhood decline, which connects to the next step in the Homewood specific broken windows theory.

### **5.1.3 Untended property becomes fair game**

When youth stop caring about themselves and their neighborhood, it seems to increase the likelihood that they will participate in delinquent and high-risk activities. Decades of research on broken windows theory suggests that delinquent youth and at-risk children see physical incivilities as a symbol of opportunities for delinquency (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960; Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Covington, 1993). However, a unique finding uncovered by the youth in this study is that in Homewood, abandoned properties go beyond being merely a passive symbol of a lack of control and an opportunity for delinquency, they facilitate delinquency directly through their use as trap houses. Trap houses connect abandonment, crime, and poor youth outcomes through their use in the drug trade, which lends itself to serious damage to both the people and places in Homewood. The youths' descriptions fit within more than one hundred years of scholarship focusing on place, neighborhood features, and youth delinquency (Dubois, 1899; Hull-House, 1895; Shaw & McKay, 1942; Shaw et al., 1929).

Vacant properties symbolize the fact that no one cares about Homewood and so, youth seem to internalize these cues and determine that no one cares about (or will intervene in) their behavior. Youth are more likely to externalize and participate in delinquent behaviors in neighborhoods characterized by blight and local adults are less likely to intervene (due to a lack of control, cohesion, and efficacy) so the use of trap houses goes largely unchecked in Homewood which the youth suggest leads to a breakdown of control and individual and community vulnerability (O'Brien & Kauffman, 2013; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997).

#### **5.1.4 Breakdown of community control, individual and community vulnerability**

At this point in Homewood's neighborhood cycle, residents who might normally have exerted social control have either left the neighborhood or withdrawn out of fear or ambivalence. The abandoned houses that line the streets are a visual metaphor for the other social problems in the community. The "trashy" appearance signals an intersection of race and class based stereotypes that stigmatize the community in the eyes of outsiders and insiders alike. Some youth displayed an ambivalent response to stigma while others reported that they felt the community had lost its dignity and esteem. They often described the stigma in racialized terms. Existing research suggests that observers socially construct disorder based on the racial and socioeconomic status of a neighborhood, put bluntly, people see more disorder in poor African American neighborhoods (R.J. Sampson & S.W. Raudenbush, 2004). Further, the stigmatization of "ghetto" neighborhoods and negative representations of black youth perpetuate these connections (Keene & Padilla, 2010). The youth were keenly aware of this fact and internalized



the dual race and place based stigma, describing how abandoned houses are specific environmental features that perpetuate and facilitate existing negative community scripts.

## **5.2 LIMITATIONS**

While the present study may contribute to the knowledge base about how youth experience vacant properties in high-risk neighborhoods, it is not without important limitations. The primary limitation of the study is that the participants came from one neighborhood in Western Pennsylvania. I recruited most of the youth participants from the Junior Green Corps, one after school and summer employment program in the community. Based on my years of experience in the community, the youth in the Junior Green Corps tend to have similar strengths and struggles to other youth in Homewood. However, the youth in the JGC are differentiated from other youth in the community because they were exposed to daily instruction and activities related to environmental sustainability and thus may be more in tune to environmental problems like property vacancy than other youth. The small, non-representative sample will not allow for generalization but I hope that the findings will be transferrable to other, similar communities (specifically rust belt communities who disproportionately bear the burden of property vacancy and blight). Further, although I asked the participants to reflect on themselves and their community over time, the data primarily represent a snap shot in time. The other limitation inherent in this study is related to data and data collection.

The youth assisted in collecting and analyzing data as part of the PPM study, however, in writing this dissertation, I was the primary interpreter and I chose what to report. This could

arguably lead to bias in reporting. I spent years in Homewood building long term relationships through the CBPR partnership that allowed me some degree of “insider” access and a rapport that seemed to make participants feel comfortable in the context of an in-depth interview. I also used multiple sources of data, including GIS data that helped to confirm and triangulate my own interpretations and engaged in member checking in order to limit bias in data collection and analysis.

### **5.3 POLICY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS**

Many policies and interventions exist to combat blight and physical disorder, but until recently, most have contributed to conditions that create incentives to vacate and abandon properties (Accordino & Johnson, 2000). This research suggests that there are many potential benefits to incorporating youth into existing intervention frameworks with the goal of improving youth and community outcomes through vacant property remediation.

#### **5.3.1 Incorporating youth into intervention frameworks**

One unique finding of this study is that the youth participants wanted to be seen as partners and leaders in efforts to improve Homewood. The research suggests several ways that youth can be engaged in existing intervention frameworks to promote youth development and community development simultaneously. First, youth should be actively engaged in planning and change efforts. Second, vacant buildings need to be secured; youth can be involved in doing this

in order to lighten the load on strapped municipal governments and to give the youth marketable construction training. Finally, communities like Homewood need to plan strategically so that they are involved in land banking and vacant property management decisions.

My findings suggest unequivocally that youth can and should be engaged in planning and implementing environmental change efforts in neighborhoods. Youth took pride in their efforts with the Junior Green Corps and reported that it makes a difference in their own outlook and that of other community members. They also proved to be strong and insightful reporters about neighborhood conditions. I have worked with adults in Homewood for many years and none were as clearly able to convey the effects of trap houses on the community as were the youth. Youth have a close-up lens of neighborhood conditions that should be leveraged when it comes to planning. Leaving youth out of the planning process risks further stigmatizing and alienating them from the neighborhood and solidifying problems related to delinquency and apathy.

We know vacant buildings are magnets for crime (Spelman, 1993). The youth participants in this study reported that abandoned houses are easy to get into because they are either unsecured, boarded only in the front, or secured so poorly that the boards are easy to pry off. This easy access to buildings seems to directly facilitate youth delinquency and neighborhood crime. If buildings are boarded up well, on all sides, the boards cannot be easily removed and the houses lose their allure. Programs like YouthBuild (<https://youthbuild.org/>) engage at-risk youth in vocational training that includes building affordable housing in their communities. Abandoned properties could be remediated through similar programs. These programs would serve the dual benefit of providing training and opportunities for young people and securing vacant buildings. Securing buildings prevents deterioration because they are less exposed to the elements and people and animals cannot easily enter and destroy the properties.

The youth in this study reported that their work with the Junior Green Corps improved others' perceptions of the youth participants as well as the neighborhood environment. In addition, they suggested that even small efforts, like picking up litter, send the message that someone cares about the neighborhood and have the potential to start a ripple effect among other youth. A visible board-up program could do even more to improve perceptions at the individual and community level.

Although youth residents report that they dream of a Homewood that has strong housing stock, racial diversity, and opportunities for recreation and amenities, in my experience, there is an underlying fear among adult residents that development will lead to speculative investment and gentrification. This is why it is important for community residents, including youth, to be at the table when development decisions are made. Land banks are an important tool that can be used to invest in strategic property management. If community residents are actively engaged, particularly youth who are out in the neighborhood and may have first hand knowledge of recent vacancies, they can identify properties early so that they do not fall into disrepair. The homes in severe disrepair exert the strongest negative externality on the youth and the community, so early identification can inoculate neighborhoods against the contagion effect of vacant properties.

#### **5.4 RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

The methods used in this study, Participatory Photo Mapping in particular, served the dual purpose of producing knowledge and also serving as an intervention that may have increased individual empowerment and improved participants' understanding of strengths and

assets within themselves and their communities. Photovoice methods and other action-oriented research methods are reflective in nature and aim to give marginalized groups an opportunity to be heard (Wang, 2006; Wang & Burris, 1997). Research suggests that this may have implications beyond the scope of the research project and promote positive outcomes at the individual and community level (Foster-Fishman, Collins, & Pierce, 2013; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005).

Though researchers have already suggested the need for testing individual level benefits of community based participatory intervention research methods, many articles remain process oriented and do not incorporate outcome measures (Foster-Fishman et al., 2005). Future research should continue to explicitly test individual empowerment related outcomes such as competence, self efficacy, social capital, political awareness, and engagement with community groups. In addition, studies should incorporate measures that capture community or neighborhood level change (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). The youth participants in this study reported that they think their efforts are having an impact on how they are viewed within the community and how they view themselves. Though these comments reflect feelings of self-efficacy and developing community cohesion, my measures did not capture this change.

Future research should examine how community change and property vacancy over time affect young people through more longitudinal work. Longitudinal studies that follow youth participants in programs like the Junior Green Corps could measure the impact of these programs over time on a variety of youth outcomes as outlined above. Additionally, they can measure community change over time by looking at block level change on blocks where remediation and intervention take place and also neighborhood level change in terms of outcomes like crime, housing values, and access to amenities.

## **5.5 SOCIAL WORK IMPLICATIONS**

This work has a variety of implications for social work practice. The research outlined in this dissertation suggests great promise in youth led advocacy and youth engaged research. The connection between research and advocacy added an important social work related dimension to the results. Finally, this dissertation highlights the utility of a strengths based, micro meets macro framework that can be used to further future social work research.

Social workers are uniquely skilled at understanding the person-environment relationship and recognizing the bidirectional nature of these interactions; that is, how the environment affects people and in turn, how people can affect their environment. This research suggests that young people have the capacity to perform important neighborhood functions that could change people's perception of the neighborhood environment and, perhaps, change individual outcomes. The photographic methods and deep engagement involved in this work created an environment in which the research method also acted as an intervention. By raising awareness of environmental problems, youth were also empowered to see their role as potential change agents.

In the spirit of the social work community practice tradition, I aimed to work directly with the participants in this research to learn how they ascribed meaning to community problems and to consider community-driven solutions to these problems. This strengths based perspective can be used in future social work research, policy, and practice to respect youth autonomy in marginalized communities like Homewood.

## 5.6 REVISITING FIXED WINDOWS THEORY: YOUTH AS THE SOLUTION

*“I think the work we do to it is one of the best things”-Mya*

Broken windows theory has traditionally focused on the role of police in “fixing broken windows” by aggressively policing petty crime with the hope that it would affect crime at the larger scale (Kelling & Coles, 1996). The evidence about whether this is an effective strategy is mixed and has caused a good deal of controversy among academics and policy makers (Gault & Silver, 2008; Robert J Sampson & Stephen W Raudenbush, 2004). The Homewood specific broken windows theory outlined by the youth participants in this study leaves the police out of the discussion. The youth suggested at times that the police and other city entities had given up on Homewood and thus, focused their solutions on internal community strengths that could be leveraged to affect the vacant property problem.

Future research should approach neighborhood blight interventions from a strengths perspective. Youth and communities could work together and develop a symbiotic relationship where youth are able to develop critical thinking skills and marketable job training while also affecting the neighborhood built environment through programs like the Junior Green Corps. If there is anything I learned from this work, it is that the youth in Homewood are likely the key to community change efforts. They understand that Homewood is a stigmatized place and that they are a stigmatized group, yet they want others to view the neighborhood through their eyes, which see the challenges but also see the potential.

## **APPENDIX A**

### **QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

This appendix includes the qualitative interview protocol that I used in the in-depth interviews with young people about their perceptions of housing abandonment and its implications. The protocol is semi-structured but I frequently used probes and follow-up questions to get more information or unpack young people's responses to the questions.



## **Discussion Prompts for Interviews**

### **1. Open with a broad discussion of the neighborhood:**

- Where are you from?
- How long have you lived here?
- What's it like to live in Homewood?
- Pretend I have never been here before—tell me what Homewood looks like.
- What are some of the best qualities of Homewood?
- What's your favorite part about Homewood?
- Tell me about some of the challenges in Homewood? (record whether vacant properties are brought up here, prior to prompting)
- What are some things you dislike about Homewood?
- What would you like to see changed?
- If you had a magic wand and you could do anything for Homewood, what would you do?

### **Meaning of neighborhood:**

- Are there any stereotypes about your Homewood?
  - Do you think the stereotypes are true?
- Describe the perfect neighborhood, what does it look like? [does it have a name?]

### **2. Move to more vacant property specific questions:**

- Tell me about vacant properties in your Homewood (leave open ended, prompt about number, what they look like if necessary)
- Is there a difference between the effect of vacant land and vacant buildings? Tell me a little bit about that.
- Why do you think vacant property is a problem in your Homewood?
- Is anyone doing anything to improve this problem? [prompt about their own efforts if they do not bring up]
- How would you suggest dealing with vacant land and buildings in Homewood?

### **3. Impact of vacant properties**

- Does vacant property affect the community's well being? How?
- How does vacant property in Homewood affect you personally?
  - Have you had any negative experiences with vacant properties in your community?
  - Have you ever been inside a vacant property? Do you know anyone who has?
    - Sensory Questions: What did it look like? What did it smell like?

- How does vacant property in Homewood make you feel?
- Do you think vacant property affects you differently now than it did when you were younger? (probe to understand differences across the life course. When you were a little kid? When you were older?)

#### **4. Outcome related questions**

- How much time do you spend outside in Homewood?
- How do you get around (car, walking, bus)?
- Can you describe your physical activity?
  - Are there any factors in your Homewood that prevent you from being physically active?
- How well do you sleep?
- What are your aspirations for your future?
- What are your aspirations for Homewood's future?
- If you could, would you move to another neighborhood or stay here?
- 
- Is there anything that I didn't ask about that you feel like I missed?
- Is there anything else I should know?

## **APPENDIX B**

### **PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTION**

This appendix provides a brief description of each participant. The description includes a bit about each youth's age, appearance, and demeanor. The descriptions use pseudonyms in place of the participants' real names.

1. Matthew, age 17: Tall African American male. Approaches me immediately to participate in an interview and shakes my hand. Friendly and eager to participate. Approaches the interview with a professional demeanor, makes good eye contact.

2. Amber, age 17: Tall African American female. Discusses plans to leave for college in the upcoming weeks. Friendly. A bit shy at first but opens up throughout the interview.

3. Jade, age 16: African American female with thin, athletic build. Appears confident and mature, convinces friend Natalie to participate in interview as well. Takes her time and provides thoughtful responses.

4. Natalie, age 19: African American female. Wears more traditionally masculine clothing including basketball shorts and sneakers. Wears hair short and has facial piercings. Friendly, professional demeanor. Makes strong eye contact.

5. Alex, age 17: Confident, strong eye contact, immediately volunteers to interview first, shakes hand and introduces self (also shakes hand at end of interview). Tall, athletic, close shaved haircut. Tee shirt and gym shorts.

6. Deandre, age 15- African American male, looks away, mumbles, does not make eye contact. Provides short answers, seems uncertain about participating in interview.

7. Daniel, age 15: Short stature, youthful appearance. Leans in, looks at microphone. Says he does not mind his name being used, in fact he would like his name to be used. Speaks loudly and seems eager and excited to answer questions.

8. Mya, age 16-African American female. Youthful appearance, friendly, gives a moment of thought to answers and then provides clear and concise descriptions.

9. Aaliya, age 14- African American female, wears short hair in a headband. Seems interested in participating in interview and provides friendly if concise answers.

10. Imani, age 15- African American female. Looks down at her phone occasionally but does not stay distracted for long, makes good eye contact.

11. Aisha, age 14: African American female. Facial piercings. Hair is in long black and pink braids tied back in pigtails in a headband. Matter of fact, short answers but confident. Good eye contact.

12. Brittany, age 15: African American female. Wears hair with short thick bangs and thick long braid. Wears eyeglasses. Provides long and thoughtful responses.

13. Kenya, age 15: African American female. Wears considerable eye makeup. Wears a shower/hair cap and walks slowly with a limp, swaying to the side. Recently recovered from surgery. Provides short answers and sometimes needs questions repeated.

14. Nawtica, age 16: African American female. Long hair in a ponytail with thick short bangs. Wears a Westinghouse high tee-shirt that has been made into fringe on the bottom so that it is a belly top. Provides short and direct answers. Occasionally seems annoyed by questions (rolls eyes and smiles at me) but participates and is friendly.

15. Breona, age 16: Tall African American female. Appears mature for her age and provides long, detailed answers. Wears eyeglasses, orange socks and tee shirt and shorts.

16. Tyrell, age 16: Mid-height African American male, athletic, thin build, hair in short dreads, shaved on the side. Eyebrows with diagonal line shaved in. Approaches interview with a

professional attitude and provides short, succinct answers. Repeatedly checks in to ensure that he is answering questions to my satisfaction.

17. Isaiah, age 16: Heavy set African American male. Some facial hair, wears tee shirt and basketball shorts, athletic sandals. Typically outspoken young man but provides somewhat short answers in interview. Says he is not feeling well.

18. Brandon, age 16: African American male, average size with short hair cut, eyeglasses. Seems confused by questions at times. Speaks rather slowly. Sometimes have to repeat and rephrase questions to help him understand.

19. A1: Kaydence, age 15: Tall African American female. Wears athletic outfit and has athletic, thin build. Smiles, make eye contact. Seems pleased to be participating in interview and stated that it was fun for her.

20. Lashawn, age 16: Average build African American female. Wears hair in a scarf/wrap. Typically has boisterous, outspoken personality. Soft spoken in interview.

21. Kadijah, age 16: African American female with athletic build. Wears pajama outfit, flannel shorts and oversized tee shirt. Glasses. Younger brother present, goofs around during interview which took place in her family's dining room. Mother's boyfriend and his friend sat outside talking on the rock wall while interview took place. Smiles, eager to explain, speaks quickly and clearly.

22. DeJuan, age 14: African American male. Short, youthful appearance. Wears hood over head and does not maintain eye contact. Very shy but opens up given time. Provides short but thoughtful appraisals during mapping activity.

23. Eric, Age 15: Wiry African American male. Pays close attention to style and wears new hats, shoes, and a Hollister sweatshirt. Outspoken but charming personality. Eager to participate though sometimes needs extra attention to stay on task. Friendly and helpful to peers during mapping process.

24. Amanda, age 16: African American female. Appears mature for her age. Wears fairly revealing clothing and occasionally needs redirection from OBB staff regarding appropriate work outfits. Friendly, bubbly personality. Participates eagerly in mapping activity and pays close attention during analysis and presentation.

25. Rachel, age 15: African American female. Wears hair in a wrap and is typically reserved but becomes much more engaged during small group activities with her friends. Needs occasional redirection during mapping activity but participates and takes a leadership role in the presentation and analysis.

26. Lamarr, age 16: African American male. Tall, wiry build. Outspoken behavior, looks toward others for a response to his behaviors. Friendly and popular among other youth. Pays careful attention during neighborhood mapping and seems to be hypervigilant to surroundings.

Needs some prompting to participate in presentation but is thoughtful, professional when talking about his findings with professionals and community members.

27. Shemeka, age 14: African American female. Athletic build. Wears hair in long braids and wears youthful clothing in bright colors. Needs some redirection to stay on task but when one on one, provides thoughtful and engaging answers. Friendly and engaged in the process.

28. Destiny, age 15: African American female. Medium build. Wears glasses and is quiet but very open and friendly among her friends. Seems to truly enjoy discussing the neighborhood during the mapping activity and provides lengthy, detailed responses.



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